NOVEL 8
THERE'S NO FREAKING WAY
I'LL BE YOUR LOVER!
UNLESS...
written by
TEREN MIKAMI
Illustrated by
EKU TAKESHIMA

Table of Contents

Color Inserts
Table of Contents Page
Title Page
Copyrights and Credits
Prologue
Chapter 1: I'm Not Mai's Fiancée? No Freaking Way!
Chapter 2: There's No Freaking Way I'll Bomb Queen Rose! (Unless…?)
Chapter 3: There's No Freaking Way We Can Be a Throuple! (Unless…?)
Chapter 4: Is There Really No Freaking Way It'll Ever Work?
The Koto Satsuki Kronicles: Redux
Epilogue
Afterword
Character Sketches
Creator Bios
Newsletter

THERE'S NO FREAKING WAY
I'LL BE YOUR LOVER!
UNLESS...

LUCIE-CHAN ON THE LOOSE!
"Who will be the king?"
"WAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!"
"Join me to bomb Queen Rose."

I knew I liked you for a reason.
You are kind to me, Renako-sama."
"Mmm."
"If Maman was here,
I think she would have been
this kind to me too."

"We're engaged."
Satsuki said. She bit her lower lip.
"You understand, we...
We have to do *something*,
or else they'll all think we're lying."

CONTENTS

PROLOGUE .....

1 I'm Not Mai's Fiancée? No Freaking Way! .....

2 There's No Freaking Way I'll Bomb Queen Rose! (Unless...?) .....

3 There's No Freaking Way We Can Be a Throuple! (Unless...?) .....

4 Is There Really No Freaking Way It'll Ever Work? .....

EPILOGUE .....

Friends? Lovers?

THE KOTO SATSUKI KRONICLES REDUX

There's No Freaking Way I'll Be Your Lover! Unless...

8

WRITTEN BY

Teren Mikami

ILLUSTRATED BY

Eku Takeshima

Seven Seas Entertainment

WATASHIGA KOIBITONI NARERUWAKE NAIJAN, MURIMURI!
(MURI JA NAKATTA!?)
© 2020 by Teren Mikami
Illustration by Eku Takeshima
All rights reserved.
First published in Japan in 2020 by SHUEISHA Inc., Tokyo.
English translation rights arranged by SHUEISHA Inc.
through TOHAN CORPORATION, Tokyo.

No portion of this book may be reproduced or transmitted
in any form without written permission from the copyright
holders. This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places,
and incidents are the products of the author's imagination
or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events,
locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.
Any information or opinions expressed by the creators of this
book belong to those individual creators and do not necessarily
reflect the views of Seven Seas Entertainment or its employees.

Seven Seas press and purchase enquiries can be sent to
Marketing Manager Lauren Hill at press@gomanga.com.
Information regarding the distribution and purchase of
digital editions is available from Digital Operations Manager
CK Russell at digital@gomanga.com.

Seven Seas and the Seven Seas logo are trademarks of
Seven Seas Entertainment. All rights reserved.

Follow Seven Seas Entertainment online at
sevenseasentertainment.com.

TRANSLATION: TNFWIBYLU Translation Team
ADAPTATION: Harry Catlin
LOGO DESIGN: George Panella
COVER DESIGN: Nicky Lim
INTERIOR DESIGN: Clay Gardner
INTERIOR LAYOUT: Tanya Sokolovskaya
COPY EDITOR: Jade Gardner
PROOFREADER: Jehanne Bell
QUALITY CONTROL: Meg van Huygen
EDITOR: Callum May
PREPRESS TECHNICIAN: April Malig, Jules Valera
PREPRESS MANAGER: Rafer Roberts
MANAGING EDITOR: Alyssa Scavetta
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF: Julie Davis
PUBLISHER: Lianne Sentar
VICE PRESIDENT: Adam Arnold
PRESIDENT: Jason DeAngelis

ISBN: 979-8-89765-401-7
Printed in Canada
First Printing: August 2026
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Prologue

> be me

> a people person

> kek

> gotta love this easy-breezy, drama-free life

> double kek

> life is sweet

> just buried all record of my sordid past and turned over a new leaf

> am now super people person

> went from Amaori Renako to Amaori Ten-outta-ten-ako

> don't even need to stand in front of the mirror every morning and recite my "im so good with people and i love socializing" affirmations

> got my sister sitch sorted out

> literally just vibing now

> life's good

> sun's bright

> nah jk that's just my sunny smile

> megalul.jpg

> mfw there's nothing but love and shining hopes on the horizon

TODAY'S STORY BEGAN on a late November day amid a riot of happy chatter at Ashigaya High School—the day being Ashigaya Fest, as those in the know called it. Ashigaya's annual cultural festival. With all the families and kids from the neighborhood schools crowding its halls, my everyday high school was transformed into a thing of the extraordinary.

Ah, Ashigaya Fest! The culmination of two weeks of hard work

from all my classmates and yours truly, solver of sister problems and sage of social situations. Who'd have thought this lonely ex-shut-in would one day work with her class to put together a school festival exhibit? People *could* change after all. Just think, I used to hate people —

Actually, scratch that. Don't think. The past was gone. Wiped. Vanished.

I'd always been popular. Back in junior high, I dominated the local beauty pageants three years running. People treated me like a princess, and everyone lined up to be my friend. Classmates flung themselves at my feet to declare their affections, but only when they weren't filling my locker with anonymous love letters. I was the teacher's pet, the apple of every instructor's eye. Junior high was the best three years of my life!

On second thought, maybe not… Erasing the past was one thing, but succumbing to delusions was another. We called this latter action "being mentally ill."

Narrowly swerving to avoid that fate, I blinked and found myself in the hallway outside my classroom with two someones shrieking in delight practically into my ear. I looked over. Shrieker One and Shrieker Two turned out to be my fangirls and beloved besties, Hirano-san and Hasegawa-san.

"Amaori-san!" Hirano-san gushed. "You are the *cutest* thing alive! Just look at you."

"Oh my god. Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god. I knew you'd look stunning in that costume, and you *do*! Oh my god, I'm so happy I got a chance to see you."

I flashed them both a charming grin. "Gosh, you think so? Thanks."

You heard them right. I was indeed cosplaying at school. Not sporting full-on, homemade cosplay à la the costume Kaho-chan made me wear, but a costume I got from the store. It was a one-piece nurse outfit, the kind you didn't see too much of in the cosplay scene these days. A *bright pink* nurse outfit. The skirt ended far above where my school uniform skirt did, and showing that much skin was terrifying. But it was too late for me to do anything about it. My thighs were on full display, and if someone thought they were a little too thicc, I'd just

have to shrug. Oh well! Thank goodness I had white tights on underneath. Tights were to teen girls as seat belts were to car drivers.

Oh, and before I forget to mention it, I was also covered in fake blood for a spooky vibe. You wouldn't want a nurse like me in your hospital. The moment I showed up to work, the one-star reviews would come rolling in.

But you see, it all made sense in context. For Ashigaya Fest, Class 1-A was putting on a haunted house.

A haunted house at a school festival! Boy, wasn't that something? Thank goodness I didn't have an allergy to preppy, people-loving types, or I'd have spent the next eighty years sneezing my nose off! But I *was* a preppy, people-loving type. So. A haunted house at a school festival? Sign me up!

It was all Kaho-chan's idea. She'd been on a horror kick recently, so she came up with a whole backstory for our exhibit—a local urban legend with a Kaho-chan twist. She was so hyped up about it, everyone else fell right into line, and the next thing I knew, the matter was settled. We were doing a haunted house.

Or haunted classroom, maybe? See, Kaho-chan's plot revolved around a girl embroiled in a love triangle that ultimately culminated in a tragic stabbing. Now the girl's ghost was doomed to roam these halls of learning. (I admit, I had a moment of "Hmm… That sounds a little sus," before Kaho-chan assured me it was entirely fictional. *Good. Let's keep it that way.*)

To tell you the truth, building the haunted house was actually kinda fun. We taped aluminum foil to the windows to block out the sun, covered the overhead lights with trash bags so it was just bright enough to be safe to walk around, built a cardboard maze inside the room, and covered the walls of the maze with newspaper studded with bright red handprints. Already, the place gave me the creeps, but we weren't done. Kids brought in scary dolls, mannequins, and whatever other weird things they could dig up that would look spooky in the dark. We kinda just stuck them wherever there was a good place for them, so we'd ended up with a weird, concept-fudging, Japanese-Western hybrid haunted house. Nothing special, as far as high school cultural festivals went, but we'd made it from scratch, and that's what mattered.

I'd grown attached to our exhibit. It was like our baby, and I'd miss it when the time came to take it down after the festival. If only we

could hold class in a blood-splattered maze, rubbing shoulders with creepy dolls—although, now that I write this out, I think maybe that'd be a bad idea.

Anyway, that's the long and short of why I was cosplaying as a nurse covered in blood.

…Except, the more I thought about it, what was a nurse doing in a haunted classroom? Didn't that ruin the theme?

…

Oh well! It wasn't my job to think those things through. I was a people person. Who gave me permission to think? (Forgive me my rude, prejudicial views of the normal and well-adjusted.)

Meanwhile, Hirano-san was saying, "I'm not a big horror person, but I'm glad we settled on a haunted house after all. You just look so cute in your costume."

"Me too," said Hasegawa-san. "Oh, cultural festival, sweet cultural festival… I wish we had one every day."

I giggled. "Oh, stop! You two are so sweet."

Ahh… I could feel their rhapsodic waxing hitting home…

All the costumes were store-bought, but Kaho-chan had taken it upon herself to doctor up the Quintet's costumes on the sly. They looked *good*. Then, with Ajisai-chan's recent makeup tutorial under my belt, I'd added a few finishing touches to raise my cosplay to the next level.

Masterful makeup and tailored clothes… Huh! Maybe I was one of the cool kids after all. I didn't even mind all the eyes on me, sitting in the attention-grabbing spot of the ticket desk as I was. Talking to strangers was, admittedly, still a little nerve-racking. But it didn't bother me as much as it used to. A little bit of nerves was better than a whole lotta nerves. Look at me, level grinding the socialization stat. I hardly recognized myself.

Just then, a teeny-tiny girl with an equally teeny-tiny voice said, "H-Hirano-san? H-H-Hasegawa-san? Does this girl…*know* you?"

I didn't recognize the uniform. Was she from another school, maybe? She hung back three paces, casting tremulous glances my way like I was a giant dog who might jump at her.

Hirano-san grinned. “You didn’t know, Nishiyama?”

“She’s Amaori-san!” said Hasegawa-san. “She was on our team during the interclass basketball competition. She knows us! She even *talks* to us if we say hi first! Don’t you, Amaori-san?”

“Yeah!” I said, not entirely feeling it.

“Really?” said Nishiyama. “Does that mean…you both had a glow-up when you started high school? And you left me behind? I…I just don’t understand? Why? How? Why???”

This poor girl was losing her mind before my very eyes. It didn’t take a rocket scientist to figure out what was going on. Hirano-san and Hasegawa-san had invited one of their old friends to the cultural festival for the express purpose of showing me off.

I’d never seen this behavior from them before, but I immediately sympathized. I would’ve done the same if I’d been in their shoes. There was nothing a socially awkward kid liked more than saying they weren’t like those *other* socially awkward kids. (Not that I’d know, being the very picture of social graces.)

Since Hirano-san and Hasegawa-san were such a reliable source of self-esteem boosts, I figured…why not? Why shouldn’t I turn on the charm a little, play along? That was the job of a people person. Call that *#blessed oblige*.

I snapped the cutest, charmingest pose in my repertoire (or at least made a valiant effort to do so) and said the cutest, charmingest phrase in my dictionary (or at least—look, you get it). “Hey there! I’m Amaori Renako. Your friends Hirano-san and Hasegawa-san are literally *so* sweet. I don’t know what I’d do without them.”

Three girls squealed as one. Nishiyama-san blanched. Hirano-san and Hasegawa-san grinned fit to burst.

“Amaori-san is part of the Quintet,” Hirano-san informed her friend. “They’re the tippity-top of the social pyramid! The idols of Ashigaya High!”

“You know Oduka Mai? She’s Amaori-san’s best friend. Amaori-san is *so* popular. People treat her like a princess, and everyone lines up to be her friend. Classmates fling themselves at her feet to declare their affections, but only when they aren’t filling her locker with anonymous love letters. She’s the teacher’s pet, the apple of every instructor’s eye.”

Okay, let's dial it back a notch.

Sorry, what's that? …You said this was all part and parcel of being a popular kid? No. Nooooo, no, no thank you. I couldn't handle that.

Wait. Never mind. I knew the socially acceptable response for such a situation. And what's more, I could say it! Because I was so good at being socially acceptable!

I flashed double peace signs and smiled like my life depended on it. "Aww! Thanks for the compliments. You put a smile on my face."

A garbled noise escaped from Nishiyama-san's throat. She tottered. She listed. She fell over backward with a crash. *Hello?!*

"Nishiyama-san?!" I exclaimed.

"Oogh," she groaned. "Blasted by an Amaori-san smile from point-blank range."

"What? Huh?"

"I'm so sorry," Hirano-san said to me. "She just wasn't ready for it. We've been scorched in the fires of the Quintet's dazzling light many times over, and even we felt our hearts skip a beat."

"She just doesn't have such a constant opportunity to talk to cute girls like we do," Hasegawa-san added. "You almost killed her, Amaori-san. I hate to say it, but we should probably go. Nishiyama! I'm sorry! Come, we're taking you back to the Land of the Louts where we belong!"

Hirano-san and Hasegawa-san got a hand under each armpit and spirited Nishiyama-san away, leaving me behind to ask myself, "What the hell was that all about?"

I mean, had Ajisai-san said the same to me right when I was still getting my high-school bearings, I, too, would've suffered a heart attack. But this analogy had one fatal flaw. Since when was I equivalent to Ajisai-san? I stared down at my trembling hands, the claws of a monster grown grotesquely strong. No. It couldn't be. I refused to believe it. It was just the cultural festival granting me an enormous stat buff. You know the feeling when you run into a classmate on a weekend when she's all dolled up, and your heart does that little fluttery thing? That's all this was. Yeah. I could declare myself a popular girl all I pleased, but even I didn't have the chutzpah to say I was on Ajisai-san's

level. She was an *angel*.

"Rena-chan!"

Speak of the anti-devil! I turned, and there she was, back from a lap around the school to hand out flyers. She was in costume too—a nun costume.

Under my breath, I said, "Hoo mama."

I'd seen her in that costume half a hundred times before (changed into my nurse outfit in the same room as her this morning, even), and it still blew me away every time. It was like dessert. You could never have too much dessert.

She had on a monochrome habit, and the headdress (called a wimple, or so I'd recently learned) and two big, beautiful Dutch braids completed the look. The occasion being a haunted house, her habit was rather shorter than is the habit for habits, with a long slit running up the side from which it was just possible to catch a dazzling glimpse of thigh peeping out over the top of her white stocking. Man and woman, old and young alike, we were *all* simping for those legs.

Visions of ping-pong matches at the hot spring danced in my head… *Ajisai-san, you may be a nun, but you've got me sweating like a sinner in church…* Wait. Except I didn't think of Ajisai-san that way. *Careful, Renako, careful. Eyes up here.* Had that skirt been even a millimeter shorter, I could've found myself in a truly compromising position. Good thing I was so socially competent and never did anything wrong ever. (To this day, scholars debate over what this line means.)

"That was fast," I said. "Handing out the flyers, I mean."

"Yup." She grinned. "People just took 'em, which was really nice of them. Made my job easier."

Who wouldn't take one, though? Before this vision of loveliness, it was impossible to commit an impure deed. Master pickpockets would shed bitter tears and renounce their ways.

"Well, you know…" I began.

"Yes?"

My cheeks burned fire-engine red. “You look… Um. You look really, really cute in that outfit. I just wanted to say that.”

I couldn’t meet her eyes, like some kind of loser. But I wasn’t a loser, okay? I was being brave. I was using my voice. Ajisai-san had told me to speak up if I thought she looked cute, and by god was I speaking up. Look at me, making growth! Someone give a gold star to Rena-chan!

“Gosh, you think?” she said. She grinned again, the smile lighting up her whole face. Then she flashed me a pair of double peace signs, and with the cutest, most wonderful smile in the world, said, “Thanks for the random compliment! You put a smile on my face.”

Hooooooly shit.

Her charm destroyed my ability to speak. My own take on that classic line was nothing but a sham. The real thing was powers of magnitude more devastating. It was a miracle I wasn’t vaporized on the spot.

The last of my deteriorating brain cells spared a thought for poor Nishiyama-san. Thank goodness she wasn’t here, lest she be turned into a pillar of salt. Mortal man—or woman—was not made to witness the majesty of an angel’s smile head-on.

No matter how many times I was grilled in its charring rays, there was no freaking way I’d ever, I mean *ever*, not be affected by it!

Before I could finish frying to a crisp under the force of Ajisai’s death-laser smile, my shift ended, and I vacated the ticket desk to make room for Ajisai-san. I didn’t want to bother changing out of my costume, so I figured I’d just wander around and have a look-see at the rest of the festival with it on. My first ever festival as one of the popular kids!

…Except that was too much for me.

Let’s be real. I wasn’t a ball of a social energy. I wasn’t an outgoing kid deep down. If I managed to fake some semblance of social graces, it was only because the rest of the Quintet carried me. On my own, I was nothing. On my own, I was Amaori Renako.

Even just, like, *wandering* and poking around the other classrooms felt awkward. Everyone but me was hanging out with their friends and having a ball. Everyone but me had someone else. I was alone. The only

loner in the universe.

Welp, I'd been away from Class 1-A for a grand total of five minutes, and I was as depressed as I'd been in my shut-in days. *Pack it up, me, hit the showers*. I really couldn't do anything without a gaggle of friends, huh. I couldn't even stand in line to buy yakisoba on my own. I could feel *eyes* on me. I could sense the fingers pointing in my direction. I could hear the whispers:

"Is that Amaori-san? Doesn't she have anyone to hang out with?" (cackles)

"She's in the Quintet and she *still* can't find anyone willing to spend time with her?" (chortles)

"Capital-L loooser." (snickers and scorn)

My membership in the Quintet counted against me. My relative fame was nothing but a stat debuff! What was I thinking, going out—and in this stupid costume, no less? What was I doing with my life?

And then it hit me. I had a place I could go: the rooftop, my beloved. Once safe in the embrace of its nonexistent arms, I'd be just fine. I could simply sit there and wait out the clock before it was time to go back for my next shift. I'd return to Class 1-A calm and collected, and no one would be any the wiser!

But as I hurried for the stairs, a little voice in the back of my head needled at me. *If you can't be social and outgoing without the support of Class 1-A, are you* really *social and outgoing?* I tried as hard as I could to ignore that voice. The only alternative was breaking down in tears.

Alas, much to my dismay, I found the rooftop stairwell blocked off by all the chairs and desks we'd carted from the classrooms.

That left me with only one choice. Tears it was!

Inside, I was a mess of anxiety. Why was this happening to me? Didn't they know some people (me) would die without access to the roof? Yes, they kept it locked and off-limits to prevent accidents, but so?! What excuse was that for depriving me of my safe space?

Had I been charming and lovable, I might've retraced my steps, found Ajisai-san, and begged her to keep me company. Had I been charming and lovable, my life would've been so much easier. Alas. I was not, and I had too much pride to swallow and go groveling to Ajisai-san. I was doomed. Doomed, I tell you. Doomed to forever

wander the grounds, a grotesque cross between a well-adjusted person and a loser. If only there was someone I could talk to around…! Had I known I'd wind up like this, I would've tried harder to make friends.

There were two types of girls in the Quintet: Ajisai-san, Kaho-chan, and Mai were one. The girls who had tons of friends and social reach. Then there was Satsuki-san, the type who only talked to a handful of people. I was a Satsuki-san. Or, more accurately, I was a girl who stuck like glue to the popular kids, the kind who held her own in group conversations but ducked out at the first sight of a one-on-one convo where her interpersonal skills were sure to fail. So not an Aji-Kaho-Mai or a Satsuki-san. A secret third thing.

I'd let my position in the Quintet go to my head, and now I was paying the price for constantly evading these social interactions. Sure, I could wander around and spot kids I'd talked to once or twice, but I lacked the ability to just go, "Hey! I'm on break. Wanna check out the festival with me?"

What was a girl to do? Hang a sign around her neck that said: *I'm a loser with a big, fat ego, popular in name only. Pls pity*? Would that get someone to talk to me? One could only hope.

Or, I could just go home!

I trudged down the hall, crushing defeat settling on my shoulders, when someone behind me called out, "Hey! Oneesan-senpai, is that you?"

Ah! I knew that voice of salvation! That high-pitched, only slightly bossy tone! It belonged to—

"Seira-san!" I said. My whole face lit up. I whirled. A person I knew! *A person I could talk to!*

"There you are!" she said. "I was looking all over for…you… Why're you grinning at me like some kinda creep?"

"No reason! None whatsoever. Boy, I sure didn't expect to see you here." Her and the rest of her group. Seira-san wasn't soloing the festival; two girls around the same age—you could tell by the uniforms—trailed behind her.

One member of said pack looked at me with stinging pity. "Oneechan…"

"Ugh!" I said. "It's Haruna!"

Belatedly, I recalled her mentioning her plans to swing by and say hi. Too bad she caught me in an off moment.

And Minato-san made three. “Hi, Oneesan,” she said, dipping me a conscientious bow. “Thank you for stopping by the other day.”

“Oh, sure. It was nothing.”

Minato-san had been nothing but respectful to me since the day I barged through her front door and accosted her sister. She was a real good kid—unlike two others I could name.

One of those two others, my sister, said, “Seriously? I came all this way just to see you, and I find you sitting around alone?”

Ouch, I thought. But two could play at that game.

I wagged my finger at her. “If you must know, I wanted to take my time, and I didn’t want to slow anyone else down. It’s called being considerate. You might try it someday.” (I admit, I indulged in a scornful laugh too.)

“Okay,” she said. “You do you.”

“But!” I said, cutting her off before she could leave. “As this is your first time seeing Ashigaya High, I’ll be nice and give you a tour.”

It was a thankless task, but someone had to do it! You know how it is with junior high schoolers. They didn’t know their asses from their elbows.

“Nah, I’m good.”

Seira-san grabbed my arm. “Psst! Oh, Oneesan-*senpai*?” (I could almost hear the italics; she was laying it on thick.) “Beautiful, gorgeous Oneesan-senpai? Aren’t you forgetting something?”

It took me a moment to place what she meant. “Oh!” I said, and I giggled. “Thanks for the compliment. You put a smile on my face.”

“*Not* that! Don’t be gross.”

Oops. Evidently, I had not placed what she meant, and my smile had no effect on her. (But…but my smile! My precious smile!)

“She wants to see Mai-senpai,” my sister translated, but then she immediately looked away. “I told her this might be bad timing with the whole…y’know…”

“There’s no y’know,” I said.

My sister, having seen the recent announcement of Mai's engagement to Lucie-chan, had concluded that Mai and I had broken up. I'd done my best to divest her of that misapprehension, but alas, it seemed to have sticking power.

At the mention of Mai's name, Seira-san's snarl morphed into a cute grin. "But you promised!" she wheedled. "C'mon, introduce me to Oduka Mai-senpai. You know you wanna."

"I would if I could," I said.

"'If'?" she repeated, latching onto the conjunction with the ferocity of the demon that was her namesake. (She really put the "oni" in Onigawara Seira, if you catch my drift.)

"Yeah. Because Mai's not here today."

"What?!"

I didn't want to piss her off, but what could I do? Mai's schedule was always booked up with shoots and stuff months in advance. She just had too much on her plate already to squeeze in a school festival on top. Granted, she did help us put the haunted house together. It seemed like she had a good time doing it too. But she was bummed out about missing the big day, so we all kept telling her, "Next year! Next year for sure."

Speaking of absent friends, Satsuki-san wasn't here today either. She'd called out sick, but she later told me she would've ditched for lack of interest regardless. Which, well. That was Satsuki-san in a nutshell.

Either way, it wasn't much consolation for Seira-san, and she visibly deflated, her hackles dropping. "Well, shoot!" she huffed. "I came all this way for nothin'."

"Them's the breaks," said Minato-san. She patted Seira-san's shoulder. "Wanna look around anyway? It's not like a festival comes along every day."

"Ughhh. I guessss."

"You know what that means." My sister pointed to me. "Oneechan, I command you to show us the sights."

A strong tone to adopt when speaking to one of the esteemed members of the Quintet, perhaps, but taking this abuse beat slumming around on my own.

“There’s a haunted house,” I said. “That’s pretty fun.”

Hence, I wound up wandering back to my classroom with three junior high schoolers in tow.

“This is random,” Minato-san said to me on the way, “but I really like your cosplay. You look cute.”

“You mean it? Thanks!”

Oh, Minato-san. The good kid.

“No, seriously. You have the right figure for it,” she said. “Haruna would be lucky to look like that someday.”

Oh, Minato-san! The best of kids! Now, if only I had an allowance to give her—

My sister butted in with a hand wave. “Hey. No feeding the wild animals.”

“Don’t be mean!” I said. What was her damage? And was it too late to swap sisters?

I had only just settled down to wait outside the classroom when Seira-san catapulted out the door screaming bloody murder. She knocked up against the wall, clutching her chest and blubbering, “Wh-wh-what was that?!”

A witchy cackle lanced the air. “Now that’s what I wanna see! Here’s a girl who gets nice ’n spooked!”

The owner of the voice emerged after it, a girl with a knife sticking straight out of her stomach—one Koyanagi Kaho-chan, whose duty it was to spook and scare visitors to our haunted house. Her uniform was one we’d bought online and roughed up a bit to make her a captivatingly creepy Showa-era ghost. That alone was a little too cute, so we added the knife in the belly and a whole bunch of blood spatters. You didn’t want to run into this girl in a dark alleyway, let alone our haunted house. She could scare the pants off you. To match the occasion, she’d freed her hair from its usual bun, letting it hang down over her face to cover one eye like a sinister specter. According to the lore, she’d died in a terrible stabbing incident after three-timing her classmates—a story that hit a little too close to home. I could only assume Kaho-chan had written it herself.

Minato-san and my sister followed a few steps behind.

“That was fun!” Minato-san said. “I’m impressed.”

“It definitely got my heart rate going,” said my sister. “Which is pretty good for an amateur gig.”

Then they saw Kaho-chan, and both girls stiffened.

“Whoa,” said Minato-san. “That’s hardcore.”

“You guys really pulled out all the stops on that outfit.”

Of course we had. Or rather, of course Kaho-chan did. She was the pro cosplayer Nagipo, and she wasn’t going to be caught dead (her words) cutting corners on her own ghost cosplay. But even the spookiest of stage makeup couldn’t hide her natural beauty, especially here in this well-lit hallway.

She beamed and snapped a thumbs-up. “Nothing like the screams of happy customers to bring me back from the grave!” Kaho-chan was in her element; she was an entertainer at heart. “You shoulda seen this one couple who came in. They were, like, totally pooh-poohing our work, so I sent ’em running in tears.”

“That’s mean,” I told her.

She laughed. “Nah! I didn’t actually. I was just messin’ with you.”

Or was she? She seemed too pleased with herself, her eyes closing into the happy slits of a smiling cat’s, for me to be sure.

Ajisai-san left her station at the ticket desk to join us. “It sounds like you guys are doing a good job,” she said. “People are coming out scared, but everyone says they’re having a ton of fun.”

“You know it!” Kaho-chan grinned wider and made a peace sign. Cutie pie.

Just then, a thought occurred to me. “Oh, right. Seira-san, Minato-san. These are…”

I made introductions for my friends. (Although Seira-san and Kaho-chan already knew each other.) Both had helped me navigate the recent crisis when my sister stopped going to school. They (and the absent Mai and Satsuki-san) were therefore pivotal characters in the lives of my sister’s friends, particularly Minato-san’s.

“Oh! Okay.” Minato-san said. She bowed to them both, just like she’d done for me. “Thank you for all your help with…you know. The thing. I appreciate it.”

“Don’t mention it,” Ajisai-san said, speaking for both herself and Kaho-chan. She waved away the thanks and grinned. “I’m just happy to see you’re all on speaking terms again.”

I’d shared most of the backstory with the Quintet members, and truly, they’d been my rock through all of that ordeal. It was only right that they knew. Namely, that my sister had stopped going to school after having a fight with Minato-san. And that Minato-san’s older sister—Komachi—was one of my old classmates, with whom I’d had a whole bunch of drama. Of course, Minato-san loved her older sister and couldn’t believe that she’d ever do anything to hurt me. And then on top of that whole complicated mess, Seira-san had involved herself in the situation in an effort to put her friend group back together.

What I hadn’t disclosed was that “drama” meant Komachi bullying me. And if Komachi later stopped going to school due to her own mental health issues, well, some things were best kept to myself.

My little sister bowed too. “I’m sorry for all the trouble,” she said. “And thank you for the help.”

Kaho-chan and Ajisai-san shrugged that off too. “No worries.”

Honestly, I felt relieved. This little scene was a nice bookend to close the chapter on my sister’s truancy troubles for good.

Ajisai-san and I exchanged a glance. She mouthed at me, “Isn’t this nice?”

The words affected me as strongly as if she’d said them out loud, and they made me feel bashful. I scratched my cheek. Because, yeah. It *was* nice. Strange, but nice. A whole group of people divorced from the context in which I knew them and replanted into the everyday hallway of my school: Seira-san, annoyed about Kaho-chan teasing her. Minato-san, embarrassed but smiling. My sister, turning red (as anyone would) in the face of Ajisai-san’s kindness.

Yeah. It was nice.

I never knew it was possible to be this happy.

When the time came to close the book on my first-ever high school festival experience, I joined the rest of my class in tearing down all the hard work we'd watered with our (fake) blood, sweat, and tears. And you know what? It was just as much fun as setting it all up.

***

One wrap party later, and I was collapsing onto the couch with a sigh. I didn't even bother to change out of my uniform. My social battery was at one percent. My facial muscles refused to move.

But hey. I did have one hell of a good time.

We'd held the wrap party at an okonomiyaki restaurant—one of those places with grills in the table so everyone could cook their own savory pancakes. Kaho-chan and class president Shimizu-kun had made the reservations and handled all the prep work. All I had to do was say "Yup" when Kaho-chan asked me if I was going. And that was it. I was officially Going to a Wrap Party. Having responsible, plan-making friends really made all the difference in life.

I think having my whole class there kept my bubbly, outgoing mask from slipping. It was like they recharged my ability to be a social butterfly. Not that I wasn't a force of social charm and charisma myself (and I'll spare you the rest of the rant; you know how it goes), but…

Eventually, I glanced up from my phone and noticed a cake box sitting on the dining room table. I got up, ambled over, and peeked under the lid. Chocolate cake—from my favorite bakery, no less!

"Hey, Mom?" I called into the kitchen, where my mom was washing the dishes. "What's the occasion? Someone have an anniversary or birthday?"

"You mean the cake? Haruna brought it home."

"Huh? She did?"

My sister had got home before I did and was now in the bath—oh, JK, I lied. Here she was walking out into the living room in nothing but a towel.

"Heya," she said to me.

"Hi. Thanks for stopping by the festival today."

“Think nothing of it, my dear,” she teased. “I would be remiss if I did not thank you myself, for you afforded me a chance to meet the lovely Ms. Ajisai-senpai and Ms. Kaho-senpai.”

“What’s the cake for?”

“Eating,” she said, drying her hair with a second towel.

“What do you mean, eating?”

“Putting food into your mouth. I thought chocolate was your favorite.”

“It is, but…” I trailed off, staring at Haruna. “You’re telling me it’s for me?”

“Sure am.”

“But why?”

The question, I thought, was one worth asking. But my sister disagreed. “Dunno,” she said. “I just felt like buying you a cake.”

When had she *ever* just felt like buying me a cake?

“You? Amaori ‘When I say split the cost, I mean down to the last yen’ Haruna, buying me a cake on a whim? Come off it. You’re telling me you walked down to the bakery, went up to the counter, and ordered my favorite flavor just for kicks?”

“You don’t have to eat it if you’re gonna be like that. I’ll just throw it away.”

“No, no! I’ll eat it.”

I whisked the cake to safety out from under my sister’s withering glare. What was wrong with her? Surely the next logical step, if I didn’t want it, was eating it herself. Who’d throw away perfectly good cake?

“What’s the big idea? I just wanna know,” I said as I went off to the kitchen to filch a fork.

My sister pointed at me. “It won’t kill you not to know. Lots of people don’t know lots of things, and they get by just fine. *You* don’t know where the word ‘fork’ comes from, and that doesn’t stop you from using one.”

“Actually, ‘fork’ is derived from the Latin *furca*, which is a term for a two-pronged instrument. According to some experts, the earliest forks were discovered at an archaeological site in Turkey that dates

back to six thousand years ago."

"Less talking, more eating, Poindexter."

My efforts to flaunt my knowledge I'd gained going down Wikipedia rabbit holes were, unfortunately, not appreciated in this house. I slumped into a chair and shoved a forkful of my cake into my mouth to soothe my wounded spirits.

"Hey, Haruna?" I said at length. "It's really good."

"Glad to hear it."

"Still, I *would* like to know the thought behind it. My best guess is you wanted to thank me after the events of the other day. But you're not the forthcoming sort. So instead of saying it outright, you bought me a cake and—"

"If you don't shut up and eat, I'm actually going to kill you."

And she meant it too, if the look in her eyes was any indication. I shut up and ate.

We weren't allowed to use that kind of language in front of our parents, though, and Mom gave her a stern talking to about making threats. Just deserts for the girl who'd just bought my dessert.

Thing is, it *was* good cake. Even if I had to shut up to eat it. The whole day had been pretty darn awesome, actually—fun festival, fun party, and an entire cake from my little sister upon arriving home. School wasn't half bad these days, and my relationship with my girlfriends was going okay. It was kinda weird when I thought about it. Since when did I have all the luck?

Sure, folks said luck came to those who worked for it. And sometimes you just had streaks when the world was your oyster. Luck was invisible, but it was real for all that. You just had to know when the wind was blowing your way; that was the trick to this whole living life thing.

You know what? I figured I should go check the horoscope, have a look-see, and find out if there was anything like "Get off your butt and go buy a lotto ticket."

I found some sketchy site, punched in my birthday, and read the results in a state of growing excitement.

Terrible Luck.

Hm. Didn't like that.

Love: Not this week! Everything's about to go wrong. Make yourself scarce.

Academics: Ouch! You know what they say—failure is the best teacher. Try, try, and try again!

Friendships: Uh-oh! Beware of false friends. Don't be too trusting, now!

Life: Yikes! There's a good chance your life is in real danger. Now's the time to invest in a bunker.

No sugarcoating here, huh? What was this site anyway? Maybe I'd misclicked on one of those weird prank websites—Miss Fortune, maybe. I plugged in my sister's birth date and got…totally normal stuff. I guess it was only my fortune that was borked.

No sooner did I think that than I cried "Ow!" as I bit down on something hard. Concerned, I hunted for it with my tongue and pulled it out of my mouth. Turned out it was a crystalline lump of sugar. Part of the cake? No way. That didn't make sense.

I stared down at the lump—and past it. There was a cut on my hand.

"When did that happen?" I said. "Did I cut myself?" On a piece of cardboard during takedown, maybe? Now that I was aware of it, it suddenly began to sting.

Behind me, my mom sighed. "Oh no. Renako, your rice bowl broke."

She lifted the two halves of the bowl to show me. What the…?

"How'd that happen?" I said.

"I don't know. It must have gotten cracked somehow. Look, it's split right in two."

It would've taken a samurai sword to slice the bowl that neatly.

"Guess I'll have to get you a new one," my mom said, but she sounded far more optimistic than I felt. I looked down at my cake. This wasn't an omen, right? A sign that something was about to go terribly wrong? I stared down at my lap, my thoughts darkening, and…

Psych! I jerked my head up and beamed. Who gave a fig about fate? Since when did luck matter? Fortunes? Pshaw. Luck was nothing

more than a quirk of probability. Everyone's life had its ups and downs, and it was stupid to bemoan every blip of so-called bad luck. What went up did *not* necessarily come down. Not when it came to luck. Yes. Definitely. Maybe.

I went to pull out my phone, but it slipped out of my hand and, in a stroke of truly impressive bad luck, landed right on my pinky toe.

"Wugh!" I yelped at the sudden burst of pain. Not the pinky toe! The weakest part of the body!

As the agony overtook me, Haruna thundered into the room, clad in pajamas and a serious look of concern. "Oneechan!"

Pouring sweat and doing my damndest not to cry, I looked up. "What is it?"

"Listen, I-I don't know how to say this."

"Yeah?" Through the haze of pain, I was struck with the oddest sense of déjà vu. If my predictions were correct, Haruna would thrust her phone into my face, and—

Haruna thrust her phone into my face. "Did you see this?!"

"This" being a huge picture of Mai.

"Am I time traveling, or is this—"

"You're not! Read! It! Now!"

"O-okay?" I said, taken aback by her pushiness. My eyes ran down the page and stopped. Because boy howdy $\times 2$.

Oduka Mai Reannounces Her Engagement

Oduka Mai, star model of Queen Rose Inc., has reannounced her engagement.

Oduka's statement reads, "To my many supportive fans and business partners, it is my pleasure to share some very exciting news. I ask you to forgive the sudden nature of this announcement, but please be understanding. I hereby declare that I am engaged to be married to a young lady who is near and dear to my heart."

The previous announcement has been retracted as false information.

“Hello?!”

Um. What? Mai??? *Someone pinch me, because I must be dreaming.* Was she going public about us?

I still remembered what she’d said to Ajisai-san and me the last time this fiancée business caused a brouhaha in the news. *I’m afraid I must ask for your patience, but…have faith in me, the both of you.* Had all her hard work paid off? Had she gone toe to toe with her mother and won herself free of her engagement to Lucie-chan? So why had this made the news, then? Was that the only way she could get her mother to back down?

Lights flashed before my eyes. I could see it all now: a ring of reporters brandishing microphones. Throbbing strobe lights. The masses hounding me for comment. Envious, incessant scrutiny. My sudden rise to stardom—

My sister shook my shoulder, snapping me out of my fantasy. “Look! Did you see this?”

“Huh?”

I glanced back at the article.

Oduka’s partner is a family friend and longtime playmate.

I looked at my sister. My sister looked at me. “You’re telling me I’ve been Mai’s childhood friend all along?!”

“Sorry, Sis,” Haruna said. “Not to hit you when you’re down and all, but…”

“Hello?!”

My sister shot me a look of pity, the kind you’d give to a friend who’d gone through a breakup weeks ago and had yet to come around.

Wait. There was more to the article. And it was *a photo of her fiancée*.

My stomach dropped to my knees. That wasn’t me. That was—

“No. Freaking. Way.”

—Koto Satsuki, poker face champ extraordinaire, staring back at me from my sister’s phone screen.

Chapter 1:
I'm Not Mai's Fiancée? No Freaking Way!

THE DAY PRIOR TO Ashigaya's school festival, Hanatori Hitoe sat on the ground before the Oduka household's washing machine, watching the clothes go tumbling around. She sighed. She'd sigh again in two minutes' time too, and once more two minutes after that. She sighed with the mechanical regularity of the spinning drum in front of her.

Most days, there was a piercing quality to Hanatori's eyes. They shone like a mirror buffed to perfection. Not today, though. Today, she let her eyelids droop like a cat deprived of one too many naps.

She'd never let Mai see her like this. She'd fallen so far, and she had nothing but a total lack of motivation to blame. Once, Hanatori had never let flagging energy levels stop her. She didn't care if she didn't *feel* like getting up and going. Her attitude toward work never slipped—not once. She was a talented, productive, iron-willed employee, and she knew it. Darn tootin' she did, as they said back home in the sticks.

The only problem was that it was all a lie, and she was only realizing it now. The truth was, through all the many years of her employment, she'd been powered by a bottomless well of motivation 24/7, 365 days a year. And who wouldn't? She worked for the one and only Miss Oduka Mai. She didn't mind fielding snippy clients or wading through bogs of tedious admin tasks if it meant working for Oduka Mai. She'd do anything for this job.

Well, maybe not *everything*. There was one duty she'd balked from, the moment the string that was her devotion snapped—

But she didn't want to dwell on that. She had bigger things to worry about—namely, the recent announcement of Oduka Mai's upcoming marriage to Lucie Lefebvre. She'd been a shell of herself since the day the news had dropped.

She'd known Lucie; that was the thing. She'd known Lucie since she and Mai were just little girls—Mai visited her whenever she went to France for work, and wherever Mai went, Hanatori went too. Lucie stood 168 centimeters tall and weighed so little she could've been a

fairy from a European storybook. Her hair color and complexion were unassumingly pale, but she shone with an inner radiance that made her a masterpiece, one of the lucky few truly blessed by the gods. Just like Oduka Mai.

If Hanatori hadn't gone into this line of work, she would never have come into contact with beauty of this miraculous caliber. For Lucie was a true beauty, and among the eight billion people on Earth, Hanatori could think of none other with such elegance, such grace, and thus such a right to Oduka Mai's hand—

Except that was a big, fat lie. Yes, she *could* think of someone better. Beating the astronomical odds, there was one other. Just one. And only Hanatori knew, and it was eating her up from the inside out.

Koto Satsuki. One in eight billion.

"Koto-sama…" she whispered, but that, too, was picked up and carried away with the wash by the clanking of the steel drum.

Childhood friend of Oduka Mai. Beautiful, brilliant, black-haired Koto Satsuki. She could not outshine Lucie Lefebvre's star power or brand recognition—Hanatori would admit that much—but that didn't change the fact that Hanatori *knew*, knew in her heart of hearts, that there was no celebrity, no influencer, no head of state more worthy of Mai's hand than Koto Satsuki.

She'd seen it with her own two eyes. She'd seen Satsuki stick up for Mai when no one else would. And they'd been only children, for heaven's sake, just little girls in elementary school.

Queen Rose might've cemented its foothold in the Japanese apparel market by the time Mai was in high school, but back then, they didn't even have their own building. Things had been different—a bad kind of different. Hanatori had been promoted to Mai's manager already, but with so few workers at Queen Rose, she still did whatever needed doing. She did admin, she did chores, she cleaned up after Mai—she did whatever it took to make Mai shine like the jewel she was.

Renée, the company president, had a dream, and Hanatori shared in it. She wanted everyone the world over to know Queen Rose's name, and Mai was the magic that would make it happen. Mai was a diamond in the rough, and by god, they were going to polish and polish and polish her until she gleamed. She was going to *shine*. Hanatori neglected anything else she might've had and poured her all into Mai.

To her credit, the young lady never complained. She shouldered the heavy burden that was Queen Rose and let her mother pack her schedule until every minute was accounted for. For her mother, she succeeded. She accomplished. She thrived.

But Mai was still just a very little girl, and with all her personal time robbed from her, she paid the price with creeping fatigue. The person who spent every minute of her waking hours with Mai should've been able to total the cost. She should've caught rearview mirror glimpses of Mai sound asleep on the short drive to and from work before the little girl snapped back to perfection and reshouldered duty. She should've realized Mai wasn't the messiah, nor a goddess. She was nothing but an ordinary little girl.

She didn't weigh more than forty kilograms, and that was hardly enough to bear up under the load of a mother's dream and an employer's entire life. But she did, and she kept on bearing up until the day she didn't—the day she chose not to go to work, otherwise known as the day Hanatori's life turned upside down.

It was as earth-shattering as it was an inevitability. Hanatori knew, then, that she had only ever turned a blind eye to the inconvenient truth: Mai wasn't infallible. What a wretched thing to ever think a person was.

She apologized, of course. That is, she apologized furiously to the client Mai was supposed to be working with, and when all her apologies were spent, she made up her mind to resign. What other option did she have? Not that it'd fix anything—resigning wouldn't undo all the harm she'd done, but neither could she be a part of Mai's life any longer.

Mai deserved better. Failing to understand Mai was one thing; missing her cries for help could be excused. That could all be hand-waved, even forgiven, as sheer incompetence born from Hanatori's ignorance. That wasn't the problem. The problem was that Hanatori had let her own vapid aspirations—and what were those, when it came down to it, but a desire to show the world that Mai was hers?—make a little girl, a little girl who trusted her, work herself past the point of what was sensible. She'd hurt Mai.

She was just like Renée. She didn't, not when it came down to it, want was best for Mai.

She still remembered the day they'd met. Mai had said, "Hanatori-san, will you stay with me?"

And Hanatori had said, “Yes.”

Now her heart was breaking, and she could barely focus on anything. But when Renée called her, she picked up the pieces; she figured she could do at least one last task before she vanished from Mai’s life. She could pull the car around and take Renée to go pick up Mai—the president’s daughter was hiding out at a friend’s, Renée said.

Only then did it strike Hanatori that she never knew Mai *had* friends. She could take thousands upon thousands of photographs of Mai and place them in chronological order by the date they were shot, but she couldn’t name so much as a single classmate of Mai’s.

She drove that car and its passenger to the apartment door of Mai’s friend place. She watched Renée step out into a world that had lost all color for Hanatori. No doubt Renée was just as shaken as Hanatori was, but Mai’s mother carried herself like a model parent. There was a job to be done, and she was going to do it. Not like Hanatori.

She found a parking spot for the car and followed Renée in. Meanwhile, she made a promise with herself to apologize to Mai, resign from the job, and begin the trek back to Saga, aka Nowheresville. She’d let her parents set her up with some dumb hick from the village, and she’d live the life she’d been destined for all along. She didn’t have what it took to dream bigger. It was all a huge mistake to hope for anything more.

And because she followed Renée, she got to see the little girl with black hair spread her arms wide and block the president’s way. “Please don’t take her away!” the little girl begged.

By all accounts, she was just a little girl. Black hair. Unassuming features. Lift a rock in Japan, and ten girls just like her would crawl out from underneath. But she wasn’t just a little girl. She was so much more.

“All Mai wanted to do was play with us,” the little girl said. “She didn’t do anything wrong! Besides, my mother always tells me that for kids, it’s our job to play. So please don’t do anything bad to Mai!”

Because most little girls didn’t have Mai at their back. Most little girls didn’t have a sobbing, shaking Mai to protect.

“Mai doesn’t need to go anywhere,” the little girl insisted. “She can stay with us if she wants, even. Because I promise that I’ll be with

her, forever and ever!"

And just like that, there was light in the world again. It was necessary—crucial, even—that someone reach out and take Mai's hand, and here was a little girl who could do just that. Hanatori was a full-grown woman, but even she was scared of Renée. Not this little girl, though. This little girl didn't yield so much as a step.

This little girl put the pieces of Hanatori's broken heart back together again.

Because she was right, Hanatori thought. She was exactly right. It was only right that she was with Mai forever and ever, to do what Hanatori could not. Make Mai happy? No, Hanatori couldn't do that. But facilitate the convergence of these two lives, to make good on this little girl's promise? Yes, maybe here Hanatori had a chance.

But that wasn't good enough. There would be no *maybe*s here. She would see it done, because that was the way to right the wrong, to heal the hurt.

She, Hanatori Hitoe, would pledge her life to the cause of Oduka Mai and Koto Satsuki.

Except, in the end, she'd failed.

She shook her head at herself and lifted her bleary eyes to the washer. She wanted Mai to be happy; she really did. But Mai's happiness could take different forms, and Mai wasn't that frail little girl anymore. She'd grown. She'd changed and learned and developed enough that she could discover what happiness meant on her own terms, and to wish for Mai and Satsuki to be a couple was nothing more than Hanatori's ego overshadowing Mai's life once more.

But be that as it may, she told herself, she simply had to put an end to this engagement with Lucie. It had nothing to do with Hanatori; it was for Mai's own good. Regardless of whether Hanatori approved of the pairing (and she didn't), Mai's heart belonged to another girl—a girl *Mai* had chosen. If Mai was going to find happiness, she needed the freedom to choose. There was no other way around it.

Which meant Hanatori had no time to sit around feeling sorry for herself, now, did she? She wasn't out of the race yet. Mai needed her, and that thought imbued her listless limbs with a resurgence of

strength. Chores. Tackle the chores first, then address the elephant in the room. Them clothes weren't gonna fold themselves, as they said back home in the sticks.

She was hard at work when she heard the front door. Good timing; she'd expected Mai home from the Queen Rose head office any minute now.

She met Mai at the foyer. "Welcome home, mistress," she said.

"Thank you."

Hanatori's eyes widened. Mai wasn't alone. "Koto-sama?"

"It's been too long," said Satsuki. "I hope you don't mind if I come over for a bit."

"Not at all." She felt flustered. Seeing the two girls side by side made it hard to let go of her matchmaking dreams. But, she reminded herself, Mai could choose a partner and still consider Satsuki a dear friend. That would be lovely, wouldn't it?

"We just informed Maman," Mai said, "so I thought you should be the next to know. Unless you mind, Satsuki?"

Mai directed a smile at Satsuki, which failed to produce much more than a crossing of the arms from her. "I don't care," she said. "Do whatever you want."

The next to know what? What was going on, and why did Hanatori's heart skip a beat? This almost felt too good to be true, something out of Hanatori's shipping fantasies come to life!

Oh, stop that, she told herself. *Don't be gross.* Let the SS Mai × Satsu sail the seas of pre-sleep storytelling while she lay in bed every night, but it had no place in the light of day. (But if the curious reader wished to know, Mai and Satsuki had lived twenty-seven lifetimes together (in Hanatori's head) and were just embarking on the twenty-eighth variation of the much-loved tale (in Hanatori's head). Why, last night (in Hanatori's head), Hanatori had had the delicious task of arranging the Mai × Satsu honeymoon. It was just her little hobby—harmless!—to imagine the ins and outs of their happy life together until (in Hanatori's head) death did them part, at which point Hanatori (in real life) sobbed and wept and simply couldn't bring herself to work while she grieved.)

Be that as it may!

Hanatori used every scrap of willpower she possessed to slap a

credible smile onto her face. “Yes?” she said. “Koto-sama, are you perhaps considering joining us for another modeling session?”

“…That might be a good idea, actually.” Satsuki sighed, none too happy about it.

Hanatori’s brain scrambled itself. Her heart soared. Would she—no! but what if?—would she be graced with the vision of this beautiful pair once more? As the lovely, mature young women they’d become, no less? Oh, her heart was about to beat out of her chest. It was like Mai’s, Satsuki’s, and Renée’s birthdays come early. *Dear mistress, sweet mistress!* she thought. *How much happier could you possibly make me?*

That was to say, Hanatori was not prepared for Mai to put her arm around Satsuki, beam, and say, “Satsuki and I are engaged to be married.”

But that was what she did, and that was why Hanatori’s mind went blank. Satsuki was nodding and saying, “Correct.” Mai was smiling at her and saying, “Isn’t this so nice?” Satsuki was r ising an eyebro and saying, So, what next? Plan on tel ing the whole world?” Mai was saying “I’l let Maman decide w en an how to eliver the of icia a nnounemen . Bu Hana ori is f mi y. I c ldn t n t ell er. S ts k a s ng, “If ou in st Sa M i Satsuki Mai Mai Satsuki Mai × Satsu Death.

Hanatori’s vision faded as Mai and Satsuki’s argument receded into the distance. For a good three seconds, her heart stopped altogether.

***

“Can someone explain to me what the *hell* is going on?!”

Amaori Renako—flummoxed, baffled, bewildered Amaori Renako—yelled loud enough to crack the sky. She—that is to say, me—had hauled herself up to the school roof at ass o’clock on Monday morning because Koto Satsuki had wanted to Talk. It was too darn cold to be outside in these uniforms, but this was not a Talk that could be held indoors where others might hear.

Just my luck, huh? With my sister back at school, I thought I’d finally have a bit of peace. But no!

I needed answers. Badly. The minute Satsuki-san got here, I

vowed I'd clamp on her like an alligator and hound her like a—like a hound! What were she and Mai *thinking*? First Lucie-chan, and now Satsuki-san? Who did she think those two were, Amaori Renako? And I wasn't even going around *marrying* multiple women, I was just… Um. You get my point. We were here to talk about Mai and Satsuki-san, anyway. Not me.

At the sound of the door opening, I whirled and accosted the guilty party. "What's the big idea? Huh? Huh?! April Fool's Day's months away!"

Thing is, the guilty party wasn't so guilty after all. She squeaked in surprise, and I spluttered. Those weren't Satsuki-san's long, lovely locks. Those weren't Satsuki-san's darling features and gentle good looks. No, those all belonged to one Sena Ajisai-san. A furiously blushing, looking-anywhere-but-at-me Sena Ajisai-san.

I leapt back like I'd been scalded. "Whoops! Sorry."

"N-no, it's fine. I guess she…wanted to talk to you too, huh?" She tried to calm herself down, but the shock was still visibly affecting her. She blushed.

"You too?" I said.

"Yeah. Satsuki-chan said she wanted to explain everything."

"Huh." I put a fist to my chin. "What's your take on the situation?"

"Mine? Well, it sounds awfully complicated. I'm sure they have their reasons, though, so…"

What a charitable take. Truly, Ajisai-san was the embodiment of humanity's natural goodness, a saint, she who was blessed with mercy and strength in equal, heaping measures. Should aliens invade and select a random individual to represent the whole species for the task of convincing them not to kill us all, I could only pray they chose Ajisai-san.

Me, though? I wasn't half as polite.

"Do you think Satsuki-san's got a crush on Mai?" I couldn't help stepping closer in my need for answers. "What if this is her way of stealing Mai from us?"

Ajisai-san smiled, but her heart wasn't in it. "I don't know," she said. "But even if she does have feelings for Mai, I'd like to think she

wouldn't stoop to expressing them in such an underhanded way."

"This is Satsuki-san we're talking about," I reminded her.

"…My point exactly…?"

I quickly realized we were getting nowhere, as Ajisai-san and I were working with such different knowledge bases.

You know that one idea, personal construct theory? It's the notion that everyone approaches the world with their own "construct"—like a series of value judgments—that makes a lens through which the world is filtered. *In English, Four-Eyes?* I got you. This theory explains why two people can read the same book and come away going "I was sucked in!" or "That was the most boring book I've read in my life." Some people consume media for the story; others, the characters; still others, the happy ending. Everyone's got their own standards, you know? Those differences in opinion stem from the variety of personal constructs. At the end of the day, it's all about personal preference, which is entirely subjective. The theory argues that, when formulating or expressing an opinion, it's crucial to be aware of your own personal biases.

Which brings us to the subject of Satsuki-san. Don't get me wrong—I thought Satsuki-san was great. She was gorgeous; brilliant; one of the hardest working people I knew; a friend to the end; and a kind, caring individual in her own Satsuki-san way.

Now here comes the but. *But* she had this habit of acting utterly bizarre. That FPS match with me and Mai was a crowning example, when she said whoever won the game would have the honor of taking my hand in marriage. Later, when I asked her where the hell that came from, she said she "just felt like it." Evidently, when Mai entered the scene, Satsuki-san let her intrusive thoughts take the wheel. You really couldn't tell what she might do next. Chances were, she'd gotten into a snit fit with someone that escalated to her blurting out, "Fine! And if *I* win, I'll marry Mai!" You couldn't tell me this wasn't plausible.

"Ajisai-san, I wish you were more aware of your personal construct," I said.

"What? What's a construct?"

"A filter. Through your eyes, every person in the world is pure of heart."

"Um. No?"

“Listen, Ajisai-san. You may be a wonderful person, but that doesn’t mean everyone else is too. You know what I think? I wouldn’t be surprised if Satsuki-san came out and told us she loved stealing. ‘I do so enjoy snatching away other people’s partners. I plotted and schemed the best way to inflict the most damage upon you both, and this was what I came up with!’”

“That’s harsh.”

“It’s the truth! She would totally say that. She always stabs you when you’re not looking. She gets you in your blind spot! It’s honestly impressive. She’d make an amazing assassin, that’s all I’m saying.”

Which was funny, because right about then I felt my life enter imminent danger.

I turned, and wouldn’t you know it? There was Satsuki-san, arms akimbo and expression dour—also, a beaming Mai. It was like the sun had come out from behind a cloud. Two gorgeous girls! The pillars of Ashigaya High! If only they could chase away the clouds of turmoil in my heart!

“Why, hello, Renako,” said Mai.

“Quite a diatribe, Amaori,” said Satsuki-san.

“Um.” Cue panic mode. “I’m not wrong, though! I’m positive you prefer netori over NTR. Right?”

“Neto what now?” said Ajisai-san, trying and failing to stay up to speed.

“No, Ajisai-san! Don’t sully your mouth with such naughty words!”

“What? What did I say?” She flushed bright red.

“Ignore the babbling idiot,” Satsuki-san cut in. “We need to talk.”

The babbling idiot was ignored, and the Quintet sans Kaho-chan got down to business on that freezing cold rooftop. Mai kicked everything off with a bow and an apology. “I’m so very sorry. I didn’t mean to cause such a fuss all over again.”

I wasn’t sure what to say. “Uh…”

“It’s okay, Mai-chan,” Ajisai-san said. “Tell us what’s going on.”

“I’d best start from the top.” She was so calm about the whole thing, honestly. “I did my best to have my mother retract the

engagement announcement, but she simply refused to listen to a word I said."

My heart sunk. Poor Mai.

"I shall not be of age to wed for another two years, but Maman does so like to have all her ducks in a row. I knew that if I was too slow, she'd see to it that I was married off without my say-so, and I didn't want to be constantly scrambling to fix the problem after it was already too late."

Her mother, she went on to say, had been alarmed by the matchmaking party Mai threw earlier this year. She wanted to lock Mai into marriage with an appropriate candidate, and while Mai had pushed back, she hadn't made much headway. I knew better than to comment on other people's family matters, but just between you and me, I didn't think Mai's relationship with her mom was all that healthy. When the mom's the president of a huge corporation and the daughter's the company's lead model, it was hard to evaluate them with the usual metrics. But…I don't know. I don't think I was wrong here.

"Fortunately," Mai went on, "someone came to my aid." Her face lit up. "A very dear, long-standing, and kindhearted friend of mine."

All eyes turned to the very dear, long-standing, kindhearted friend of Mai's. She couldn't quite meet our gaze. "You don't need to make such a big deal about it," she demurred.

Mai chuckled, a full-throated, genuinely happy chuckle. "How chivalrous, to sacrifice yourself and brush it off as nothing. You're a shy one, my dear friend. The noblest and most virtuous of us all. Why, if I could, I'd make you a trophy and present it to you myself."

"Thanks, but I'll pass." Satsuki-san's brow furrowed in genuine displeasure, but Mai just read that as another shining example of her modesty and giggled.

"So… Where is this going?" I said.

Mai puffed out her chest, proud as a parent whose kid had won first place in a race. "Satsuki nominated herself as a potential marriage candidate. No one else would do for Maman, of course. She relented only because Satsuki and I have known each for so long."

"Don't get any funny ideas," Satsuki-san added, as nonchalant as if this were any other conversation and not her literally agreeing to marry

her best friend. “It’s not what you two think. I would never marry Mai in a million years.”

Excuse me?

“It’s all just for show to get rid of the first fiancée. We’ll be engaged until Mai comes of age, at which point I’ll come up with some likely story to break it all off. Then, ta-da. You’ll be free to date once more or whatever other nonsense you three plan on getting up to.”

Ajisai-san and I exchanged glances. She, Mai, and I were a throuple. Not the most typical relationship in the world, but we made it work. Or rather, we’d made it work before Satsuki-san arrived and started throwing wrenches into the mix. I had to give myself a minute to digest the full implications. If Satsuki-san was engaged to Mai, that meant—

But before I could say anything, Ajisai-san spoke up in a very, very quiet voice. “You’re lying to Mai’s mother?”

I caught Mai’s almost inaudible gasp.

Ajisai-san rushed to correct herself, waving the question away with her hands. “Sorry. I’m not trying to attack you two. I just think this is…a bit concerning.”

“You’re correct.” Satsuki-san’s bluntness sounded defiant. “We’re tricking Obasama.”

Next, she turned to Mai. “What, do you suddenly have a problem with it now? She was the one who forced you into a marriage you didn’t want. You shouldn’t feel guilty. Or what?” She gestured to Ajisai-san and me. “Do you want to give them up? Is that what you want to do? Give up the girlfriends *you* chose?”

Ajisai-san and I fell quiet, and this time, there was no one to break that silence. The sounds of footsteps and chatter from arriving classmates filtered up to us from the ground below as we all sat there with our own individual thoughts.

I…I really didn’t know what to make of this. I wasn’t equipped with the tools to decide if Mai and Satsuki-san were doing the right thing. All I knew—or hoped, maybe—was that this would allow Mai, Ajisai-san, and I to be together. And that made me happy.

“You chose them,” Satsuki-san repeated. “You made your choice. You picked Amaori and Sena over your other fiancée, and it’s ridiculous

to fret about it now. Listen to me, Mai. Making a choice—"

Something within me took over, and I finished Satsuki-san's sentence for her. "Wipes out all other options."

Only then did it hit me that this was an awful time to interrupt. Satsuki-san was taken aback, but she quickly recovered and nodded.

"Correct. See? If even Amaori gets it, why don't you?"

Mai just smiled. "Thank you, Satsuki, but it's all right. I appreciate you trying to look out for me, but I know what I must do."

Satsuki-san paused. "Well. Fine, then. Remember, we're to act like we're engaged whenever in public. Do not, and I mean *do not*, slip up and give everything away."

Well…now I knew where the announcement had come from. I guess. But I still didn't know one thing, and that was—

"Satsuki-san, why are you doing this for her?" I said.

She lifted an eyebrow. "What do you mean, why?"

"You know." What did Satsuki-san have to gain from all this? Not much, at least from my perspective. I could see Satsuki-san helping Mai from the goodness of her heart if Mai was in a really, really bad way, but like…I just had this weird gut feeling that something wasn't right. I didn't know what, but it was real. Maybe it was my personal construct at work, convincing me there was more to this story than met the eye. But again, what was that something?

Satsuki-san sighed in the face of my confusion. "Although I hate to say it outright…" She flicked a glance at Mai. "Is it really that much of a stretch to think I might help Mai without something in it for me?"

"No! I just…"

I didn't know how to combat Satsuki-san's bluntness, and she just steamrollered on. "We'll say it was for Sena. Happy?"

"Me?" said Ajisai-san, startled.

It took Satsuki-san a moment before she could continue with, "Yes. I couldn't care less what happens to Amaori or Mai, but I wouldn't want *you* upset. I owe you, do I not? I'm simply repaying the favor."

"Satsuki-chan, I don't know what to say."

Talking past her, Satsuki-san went on. "And it's no big deal, really.

All I did was go with Mai to talk to Obasama. I may have to field a few additional things with the Oduka family, but that's hardly any skin off my nose."

Huh. Was that all there was to it? I don't know… It felt weird to hear Satsuki-san openly admit to an act of altruism, although if pressed to explain why, I'd struggle to come up with an adequate answer.

"But I suppose this does complicate things, doesn't it?" said Satsuki-san. "Look, Amaori's standing there confused."

"I mean, yeah?" With one twist after another, my thoughts were a scrambled ball of yarn.

Satsuki-san fished a notebook out of her pocket. "Here, let's draw a chart of the current situation."

Ajisai-san and I both gasped in sync. "A chart?!"

Satsuki-san looked at our handiwork in confusion. "Who is Five-kun?"

"How could you forget Five-kun?" I said. "My emotional rock? My moral support? My savior without whom I'd be stranded?"

"Ah," she said. "Right. It's not a *great* look to anthropomorphize an object you'll only go on to replace one day, but that's none of my business."

I don't know what she meant by that, but anyway—did I tell you about Five-kun? We got a PS5 the other day. His specs were next-level; his chassis was sleek. Four-kun whomst? I doubted I'd ever touch my PS4 again.

Anyway, that chart was the long and short of my current relationship status(es).

Ajisai-san couldn't tear her eyes away from it. "Gosh…" she said. "L-laying it out like that… 'Adores'…"

God, she was so cute.

Satsuki-san snapped her notebook shut. "Moving on. This solves the Obasama issue, does it not? You three have nothing to be concerned about. Oh, there'll be the usual media hubbub, but once it blows over, you can continue on your merry, loving way." She flipped her hair back in a magnificent *whoosh* and shot us a smirk. "Congratulations, lovebirds. I wish you all the best."

Some part of me still didn't feel quite right about all this. But a larger part of me accepted that this was probably the easiest solution. Mai and Satsuki-san knew Mai's mom best, and it was their idea. It would, if nothing else, be a huge weight off Mai's mind. It hadn't been easy watching her fight with her own family. I was no saint, no shining example of humanity like Ajisai-san, so I still struggled to accept that Satsuki-san's involvement was wholly altruistic. But she *was* a kind person at heart, and she'd always fallen over herself to take care of Mai for as long as they'd known other each other. Still! It was strange.

Head-over-heels for
Engaged...?
Tries to be a good gf
Adores
Thinks is sus
Just in it for Sena
Darling dearest
True love
Tired of her shit
Besties
Five-kun

And it was so strange that, just before we all went inside, I said in an undertone, “Hey, Satsuki-san?”

She stopped, letting the other two go on ahead. “Are you sure…” I began. I paused. “Are you sure you’re not doing this because you have feelings for Mai?”

Satsuki-san turned very, very slowly. Her lips curled up in a nasty grin. “You don’t know a thing,” she said. She leaned in, close enough to impart a whispered secret if she wanted to. “Mai likes *you*. Understand?”

I didn’t know how to respond. The best I could do was nod. “Y-yeah.”

She stared me down a few moments more before losing all interest in me and sauntering off.

Um…?

A chilly breeze swept past, a match to the gloomy cloud cover above. If there was one thing I picked up from this conversation, it was that I didn’t know the first thing about Satsuki-san.

***

With the cultural festival behind us, there were no further major events at Ashigaya High for the rest of the season. All we had to look forward to was winter break and the slow, leisurely days leading up to it—leisurely in assumption only, though, as I soon realized I was horribly, horribly wrong.

Gossip blew in like a hurricane, a storm that swept up the entire school. And small wonder, right? Mai and Lucie-chan’s engagement had felt like it was happening half a world away, but this was news in our own backyard. This was Mai getting engaged to *Satsuki-san.* Both stunning suitors were *in our class*, and while hot girls dating hot girls was becoming more accepted in the modern day, it was still a newsworthy event—particularly when it was literally in the news. I would’ve been surprised if it hadn’t turned heads.

People whispered in the halls. “This couldn’t have come out of nowhere! You think they were an item since way back when?”

“Had to be! They’ve been dating all along!”

“There couldn’t have been a more beautiful match. It’s just so romantic.”

“Whose last name are they going to take? Are we gonna have an Oduka Satsuki or a Koto Mai? I’d *kill* for either one, honestly.”

Mai had a fanbase to begin with, but now even Satsuki-san—who radiated an *I hate humanity* aura on the best of days—found herself with an entourage everywhere she went. And if the two happened to bump into each other in the halls? The school had a field day. I could hear the gushing from here. Every glance between them, every word that passed from one to the other, elicited a wave of cheering that could’ve drowned out an idol concert’s. The conquering heroes, riding back to the castle in the wake of saving the world, couldn’t have asked for a warmer reception. I shuddered to think of how many handkerchiefs Takada Himiko-san, Mai’s would-be rival, must have bitten through in a fit of jealousy.

Me, though, I was just like. Chillin’.

“Wild stuff, huh, Kaho-chan?” I said to her during break one day.

“Uh-yup.” Kaho-chan was the only one in the dark about Satsuki-san’s true motivations, but she clearly knew more than she’d been told. “Somethin’s up with Saa-chan. She’s, like, playing to the audience. Tryna make everyone think of her ’n Mai-Mai as an item. But you and Aa-chan are the biggest giveaway. You wouldn’t be playing it this cool if something wasn’t up.”

Damn, look at Kaho Holmes over here. I had to give her props for her intuition, even as guilt pricked at me for keeping this secret from her.

“You don’t have to fill me in,” she added. “If y’all aren’t tellin’, it’s gotta mean it’s secret for a reason.”

Damn! Kaho Homie over here! The maturity of this girl, I swear.

I was almost getting disconcerted by her glut of good qualities when she reassured me that she was not, in fact, perfect, by shooting me a sly grin. “But just between you and me…” She shaded her hand with her mouth. “It’s gotta be rough watching ’em mack on each other all day, huh?”

“Honestly? Not really.”

“Yeah? You mean it?”

I mean, sure. If Satsuki-san went all “Mai-chan!!! I wuv you so much, my little schmoopsy-poopsy! Mwah mwah mwah mwah mwah,” I would’ve been a bit perturbed, but be real. This was Satsuki-san we were talking about.

“But they’re engaged,” Kaho-chan said.

“Yeah.”

She wriggled for emphasis. “That means *living* together. Sleepin’ in the same bed. Girl!”

“It’s Satsuki-san. She’d never willingly sleep in the same bed as Mai.”

“Bathing together! Gettin’ butt naked and rubbin’ on each other! Girl!!!”

“It’s Satsuki-san. She’d never let anyone disturb her precious bath time.”

“Just who do you think Saa-chan is, Rena-chin?”

Huh? I thought she was Satsuki-san. “She’s Satsuki-san. ’Nuff said.”

“She’s a teenage girl who just lurvs the concept of luuuurv,” Kaho-chan said, punctuating her comment with a wink.

I shook my head. “Nah.”

“Nah what?”

“She’s…” I hunted for the right word. “Satsuki-san.”

“Your head working all right, Rena-chin?”

“I sure hope it is.”

I don’t know. I guess I didn’t know much about Satsuki-san when it came down to it. We might have been the *very best friends in the whole wide world*, but she was a person of mystery to me.

“She once told me she doesn’t do romance,” I said.

She made her intentions clear at every available opportunity. Even the time she asked me out over text had been nothing more than a way to get under Mai’s skin. Well—she didn’t *say* as much. But please, what else could it have been?

Besides, the whole notion of teenage girls being obsessed with romance was a whole lotta societal hooey. If I hadn't met Mai or Ajisai-san, romance wouldn't have crossed my mind once. And that would've been fine. I could've lived a perfectly happy life with zero romance in it.

"So," I went on, "it's really not a big deal for me."

Kaho-chan was silent for a moment, just watching me, before she stretched her arms high overhead. "Bah! And here I was trying to make you jelly."

"Why would you want to do that?"

"'Cause you're no fun otherwise."

"Ouch."

Oh, Kaho-chan. She never changed. And yet maybe her unwillingness to compromise herself in any way was a great help for me keeping it together. When she was teasing me, I was too busy fending off her nonsense to feel gloomy about this secret I'd been sworn to keep. You know what? I owed Kaho-chan a thank you.

But then the bell rang, signaling the end of break, and I went back to my seat. Ajisai-san was already at her desk in front of me. Today, she wasn't chatting with anyone—just staring out the window, kinda out of it, almost. It wasn't like her, but it was also an undeniably beautiful sight. Seeing her in profile like that highlighted just how attractive she was, and I was struck with a wave of admiration. I realized there was so much more to her than that endearing, adorable charm. She was beautiful.

She didn't look at me, but she opened her mouth all the same. "Y'know what?" I almost thought she was talking to herself. "People keep shooting me looks when I pass them in the hall. They feel bad for me, and I don't even know them."

"Probably the Mai × Aji shippers," I said. "They think they lost the war."

The local Mai × Satsu and Mai × Aji shippers had been engaged in a bitter, underground conflict over who Mai would wind up with. *There's only one person good enough for the supadari, and that's Satsuki-san! No! Ajisai-san or bust!* You get the drift. Evidently, once the news of the engagement hit, the Mai × Aji purists had rallied together to console their fallen figurehead. (Although, really, this was none of their

business.)

"But they *haven't* lost," Ajisai-san grumbled, annoyed at the injustice of the universe. "That's the thing."

I'd caught her sulking quite a bit the last couple of days. Her eyes seemed to follow Satsuki-san and Mai around the room. The Ajisai-san I knew was always ready with a smile and a kind word for everyone, so this wasn't like her. I wondered if she was having trouble coming to terms with the fake engagement. To be honest, I was too. But what could I do about it? Nothing. Nothing at all.

I dug into my bag, getting out my stuff for class—and flinched.

"Gotcha!"

Something—a finger—skittered down my back, making me yelp. All the little hairs on my body stood on end, and I whirled.

"What is it?" I demanded of Ajisai-san, but she was just staring out the window again.

"Nothin'." There wasn't a drop of emotion in her voice.

"No, but you just… Oh, never mind."

Ajisai-san *never* messed with me. Kaho-chan was being a bad influence on her. She didn't look my way once, so eventually, I turned back to my bag and—

"Gotcha!" Her finger ran down my spine again.

"Wagh! You did it again!"

What was the *matter* with her? Not Ajisai-san acting weird too…

The news of the engagement turned the whole school on its head, which just went to show what a big deal it really was. Still, I thought, people really must've had nothing better to do with their time if they were that wrapped up in someone else's love life (said the girl wrapped up in that love life). But it could've been worse. Everyone getting all in a tizzy about relationships beat drama about so-and-so fighting with or bullying such-and-such. Hooray for having nothing better to do. It meant less anxiety and stress for me. We stan having nothing better to do. *May we all live in boring times.* Times free from strife and conflict, peaceful times, times free of things that set off my anxiety. Yes. Give me the life of a plant.

I was still wishing to join the vegetation along my walk home from school when someone came up behind me and grabbed my arm. Hello? The someone yanked me, hard, and dragged me off the main road into a narrow alleyway. Hello?!

"Wh-what are you doing?!" I yelped.

Was I being kidnapped? Was I to be ransomed? The Amaoris were just an ordinary family! What ransom?!

I turned on my captor and was met with a mask of desperation. "Renako-kun!"

"Y-Youko-chan?"

I stared at my friend from class 1-B, Terusawa Youko-chan. She was a bright, vivacious, sweet girl—but also the girl who'd bit someone hard enough to leave teeth marks in a group bathing situation. Not naming names.

Instinct kicked in, and I clamped my hand over my neck for protection. "Why'd you have to scare me? Just say hi like a normal person! My heart about jumped out of my throat."

"Look, I'm sorry!" (And if she was admitting fault, I couldn't really castigate her further, right?) "But I really need your help! I can't handle this myself any longer."

"What are you talking about?"

I'd never seen Youko-chan so worked up before. She must've been at her wit's end.

A horrible feeling crept up on me, filling my lungs and driving all the air out of them. No, I *had* seen Youko-chan like this before. A moment when my scatterbrained, adorable friend turned red with rage and unleashed a fury she'd never dare show at school.

"You *have* to know," she said.

"No. No, I don't think I want to—"

She yelled right into my face. "I'm *talking* about little miss spoiled princess!"

Ah. I hated being right.

Youko-chan tapped her IC card to the door of Lucie's high-rise apartment and slowly, trepidatiously, cracked it open. The curtains were shut tight. The room was dim.

I gulped. There was some kind of writhing, rustling thing in the middle of the darkened room. A person? A figure wrapped in a blanket? Wh-why did this feel like a horror movie all of a sudden? This made our haunted house look like a walk in the park!

I just about jumped out of my skin when Youko-chan's hand landed on my shoulder. I turned, trembling, to see the calm in her eyes.

"It's all up to you, Renako-kun," she said.

"What?"

"Whatever happens next, I bear no responsibility. Ciao!"

"Wait! Hey—"

She made an about-face and zoomed out of there. Hey!!!

Who did she think she was? Why was this *my* job to take care of? I'd met Lucie-chan three times in my life! I was practically a stranger! Freaking Youko-chan… Ughhh. I remembered my last visit to Lucie-chan's place all too well. Youko-chan did *not* want to deal with that girl, huh.

A thin whisper of a voice drew me out of my thoughts. "Renako-sama?"

Eep. Well, she'd said my name, so there was no getting out of this now. I slid my shoes off and padded over to the blanket-wrapped lump that was this apartment's principal occupant. She looked up at me with reddened, swollen eyes.

So much for boring times. What we had here, ladies and gents, was the victim of Mai and Satsuki-san's plan: the French model who came to Japan to be with her now ex-fiancée. The heartbroken and jilted Lucie Lefebvre.

She grabbed me and pulled me into a hug. Her wide eyes shone with tears, and she blubbered into my shoulder, "Renako-samaaa!"

"Careful!"

Her hug toppled me over. Suddenly, I was lying flat on my back, and all I could focus on was the long shimmer of her silver hair and the shine of her sapphire eyes. Her skin, porcelain pale to begin with, seemed to radiate with a soft inner brilliance. The neckline of her negligee (a babydoll negligee, the back of my brain helpfully supplied) did little to conceal her cleavage—especially not when she was right on

top of me. She sniffled back a sob, and even in the relative gloom of the room, I was struck by the life—the light—in her eyes.

"Um," I said.

This position was a bit. Ahem. Compromising. Her tear-streaked face and near-streaking choice of garment were, shall we say, a bit too *enchanteresse* for my liking. Crying only made pretty girls prettier, shall we say. Help, she was too freaking cute, shall we say!

Normally, Lucie-chan's stunning good looks made me think of her as some kind of fairy-tale creature, but these tears brought her down to Earth. Made her real in my eyes. Her touch, her nearness, the feeling of her…ahem, hem!…pressing against me made my heart beat like a drum.

"Renako-sama…" she whispered. The cherry-pink lobes of her lips seemed to almost cling to the syllables of my name. My heart pounded so loud in my ears I couldn't think straight.

"L-Lucie-chan—"

She lowered herself onto me, her butt striking my hips. She was all but lying on me. Hello? What was this position?!

Practically riding me now, she took my hands in hers. "Please," she whispered. "Join me."

"J-join?"

In what sense? *In what sense, Lucie-chan?!!!*

No! I had a girlfriend! Two girlfriends! Two very cute girlfriends whom I was not about to cheat on! *Don't come on to me, Lucie-chan! No! I am very, very bad about telling people no—so please, don't even start!!!*

My mind wouldn't shut up, but my mouth refused to speak. I opened it, closed it, and tried again. No luck. My words were gone.

Lucie-chan tilted her head, fresh tears budding in the corners of her eyes, and squeezed my hands. And then she…she—

She wrenched a smile back onto her face and said, "Join me to bomb Queen Rose."

…

…

"What?!"

Somehow, when I'd pictured an explosive evening with a hot bombshell, this was not what I had in mind…

Also. Wait. *Lucie-chan, you're not serious, are you?!*

Chapter 2:
There's No Freaking Way I'll Bomb Queen Rose!
(Unless…?)

AND THERE YOU HAVE IT, folks. This was the start of my involvement in the messy, messy drama that was the Mai, Satsuki-san, and Lucie-chan love triangle.

In the end, though, I think this was something we all needed for ourselves. I *think*.

The people on social media whining about wanting fifty trillion yen didn't actually want fifty trillion yen. They want a couple dozen thousand yen to burn and the freedom to treat themselves right for a change. I said I wanted a best friend I could trust from the bottom of my heart, but all I really wanted was to be someone worth being proud of. We all chase after the things we think we want, but we never know what it is we're really looking for until we reach a crisis point. That's because relationships between people are really, really, complex. And people are even more complex than all that.

We don't know what it is we're looking for even when it's pointed out to us. We don't really get it until we recognize it for ourselves. But you know what? Even if it takes us a while to find what it is we really want, even if we get lost along the way, even if we make mistakes, the time we spend wishing, fighting, striving for that thing we just *think* we want—none of that ever goes to waste, at least in my mind. No, that's not good enough. I want to believe that this is true; I really, really do. I want to believe that all our time is precious, and we all have a time in our lives when we fight to become the version of ourselves who's just that little bit better than the person we were yesterday. We call that time "youth."

Feelings are such big things—way too big for us to handle. Hell, we're just teenagers still. Our feelings buffet us about. They baffle us and balk us. And yet sometimes, they also lend us unbelievable strength.

Like on the day I promised to make Mai and Ajisai-san happy. And now, coming up, on another day just like it—the day, in service of

becoming those better versions of ourselves, we chose to confront our feelings.

***

…Which is how I found myself hiding in the shrubs outside Queen Rose's Shibuya headquarters. If I was spotted, I'd have the police called on me in two seconds flat. Lucie-chan, dressed in one of her usual princessy gowns and a ridiculously expensive fur coat, crouched next to me in the bushes. (I'd recognized that my uniform would make me stick out like a sore thumb, so I'd gone home, changed, and come back. I wanted *some* sort of disguise.) Why, oh why, had I let myself get dragged into this?

"Here, Renako-sama." Lucie-chan slipped a shiny black credit card out of one of her furry pockets. "Buy a bomb. Cost is not an issue!"

"The issue," I said, "is that nobody's going to sell me a bomb. This is Japan."

She was as stunned as if a hawk had swooped down and stolen a crepe right out of her hand. "What? Then how do we bomb Queen Rose?"

"We can't. It's impossible, and I hope you can recognize that."

"*Impossible n'est pas français*," she responded, her speech smooth and fluent for once. *Sorry, I don't speak italic…?*

Fortunately, a familiar voice from just overhead supplied the translation. "That's French for, '"Impossible" is not French.' One of Napoleon's sayings. We usually translate it as '"Impossible" is not in my dictionary.'"

My blood ran cold. I looked up into the beatific smile of the girl looming over me—one Oduka Mai.

"Mai?" I spluttered. She was the *last* person I wanted to see right now! Although, given the location, the most logical person to be here!

"Why, hello, Renako and…Lucie? Funny to see you two together."

"I can explain." I rose to my feet, turned to look back at Lucie-chan—but she was gone. Hello? Did she just pull a runner, leaving me on my own? No. Upon further inspection, I found her crouching behind

a tree on the opposite side of the road (with half her butt sticking out).

"Lucie," Mai said, pointedly.

"Ça fait un bail! Comment vas-tu?! Comment te sens-tu?! J'espère que tu vas bien!"

Oh no, not the return of the italics! And at such blistering speeds! I had no idea what she was saying!

Mai made a thoughtful noise and looked from me to Lucie-chan and back again.

"I *can* explain," I said. "It's just a long story."

"I would imagine so."

"Lucie-chan's a gamer! Just like me. We're gaming buddies. Just, uh, coincidentally! I only learned she was your fiancée the other day. Small world, isn't it?"

Which was all true, but because I rattled it off so quickly, it sounded like a load of bull even to my ears.

Mai sized me up, studying my word choice with the care of a detective in the back half of a mystery TV show. "Coincidentally, you say. How so?"

"Uh. I met her on the side of the road near the train station. She'd gotten herself lost, and she was curled up on the ground hugging her knees, so…"

I was so busted. No one in this day and age would believe me for an instant.

"Ah. That sounds like Lucie, sure enough," said Mai.

"Ouch." I was almost impressed. If Lucie-chan got lost often enough for it to constitute a behavioral pattern, it was no wonder Youko-chan was tearing her hair out.

Lucie-chan peeped out from behind her tree with a sheepish grin. "Renako-sama saved me," she said. "Thank her too, Mai."

"Thank you, Renako."

"Uh, don't mention it."

Mai bobbed a bow and rose again with a smile. "She's such an innocently charming girl, but she does struggle with the little things. I do apologize."

“Aw! You called me charming.” Lucie-chan put her hands on her cheeks and beamed, suddenly bashful, a far cry from the would-be terrorist I’d been talking to just minutes before. Was this the same person, even?

“Yet she’s taken to living in Japan like a fish to water,” Mai continued for my benefit. “She says she’s enjoying herself immensely. I’m glad to see she’s making friends too.”

Lucie-chan nodded, as delighted as a little kid invited to a playdate by her best friend. “I am! Because Mai and Satsuki taught me lots of Japanese.”

“And you’ve made great strides since. Have you encountered any difficulties thus far? Apart from the language barrier.”

“No! Not really.”

“Excellent.”

Talk about a normal, friendly conversation. Mai crossed to Lucie-chan and patted her slim shoulder. Lucie-chan smiled at the touch, closing her eyes in contentment—then blanched, snapping to attention like a person coming out of hypnosis.

“No!” She dove for cover once more and jabbed an accusatory finger at Mai. “Not that! I’m not here for that!”

Ah, yes. She’d finally recalled her rage.

“Oh?” said Mai, confused—if not especially so; she was clearly familiar with Lucie-chan’s mood swings. “Oh! On the topic of gamer friends, Renako actually taught Satsuki and me how to play not long ago. I’m not too shabby at FPS games, if I do say so myself. We ought to set up a time for all four of us to play together.”

“Can we?” Lucie-chan emerged from her Amaterasu cave once more, her face glowing as bright as the sun. “That would be fun!”

She’s got the emotional range of a toddler, I commented to myself just as a second thought crossed Lucie-chan’s mind and caused her to flush bright red.

“No! Not that! I’m not here to play games. What do you think I’m here to do?”

“To hang out with me, as you have nothing better to do with your time. No?”

“I do *too* have something better to do!” Lucie-chan said, stomping the ground in a tantrum. Her finger was primed on the imaginary missile launch button. “Renako-sama and I are bombing Queen Rose!”

Ah ha! That’s what we call a felony!!!

Even Mai couldn’t roll with that punch. “I-I beg your pardon?”

Lucie-chan swelled with pride, as pleased with herself as a kid pulling off their first-ever prank. “Yes. Renako-sama will buy lots and lots of big, big bombs. Tell her, Renako-sama!”

“Don’t drag me into this!” I waved my hands *no* in horror. This was the last thing I wanted to be a part of!

Mai’s confusion mounted. “I’m sorry, I don’t understand. Are we talking about something in a video game?”

“Yes!” (That was me.)

“No!” (That was Lucie-chan.)

Unfortunately, Lucie-chan was the louder of the two and dead serious to boot. “I mean it. I am very, very mad. You canceled our engagement. You made me feel left out! I’m as mad as…as…as I was when you and Satsuki ate that yummy dessert without me! I am mad, mad, mad!”

Her cheeks swelled with anger, her entire body radiating with the force of her fury. I’d always heard models could tell stories with their whole bodies, but not like this!

But Mai just ignored it. She crossed to Lucie-chan again, closing the distance and forcing Lucie-chan into a weird threatening pose.

“What?” Lucie-chan said. “No! It is too late to apologize. Renako-sama and I will bomb Queen Rose, and that is that!”

Mai grabbed Lucie-chan by the wrist. Lucie-chan squeaked.

Uh…Mai? *Should I intervene…?* Lucie-chan was out of pocket with those bomb threats, yes, but she was as much a victim of circumstance as anyone here. She didn’t need Mai chewing her out on top of all that.

But Mai knew that too. She dropped Lucie-chan’s wrist, and she bowed. “I’m sorry, Lucie.”

Lucie-chan went silent.

“I know I already apologized to you—multiple times, even—when

Satsuki and I moved ahead with finalizing our engagement. But I should like to apologize once more. Maman was the one who orchestrated my engagement to you against my will, and I can only imagine how it must have upset you too. I know you agreed to it because it was best for the company, but Lucie… You really, truly didn't have to."

She looked up now and fixed Lucie-chan with a smile. She shook her head, slowly and with deliberate care. "I know you feel you owe my mother a debt for all the kindness shown to you. And I thank you for your efforts to repay it, I do. But Lucie—you have your own life. You don't need to let Queen Rose hold you back. Go out and find your own happiness."

Her gentle smile belied the heat in her words. Mai meant it. She wanted, with her whole heart, for Lucie-chan to be happy. But… Wasn't this suggesting that Lucie-chan…?

Lucie-chan had come halfway out from behind the tree again, transfixed by Mai's words, before she realized what she was doing and dove for cover. "You don't get it," she mumbled into the bark.

"I don't get what?"

Lucie-chan filled her cheeks with air. I think she was trying to smile, but it looked more like she was about to cry. She tried on half a dozen expressions before she settled on a scowl and pointed at Mai.

"Do you know what I think about you?" she said.

"I'm sure you—"

Lucie-chan cut her off with a glare. "I hate you! I've *always* hated you, Mai!"

Damn.

Mai looked as rattled as I felt.

"You get all Renée's attention. You get everything! I hate you!"

"Lucie, I… I thought you used to—"

"Forget about *used to*. I'm talking about *now*!" Lucie-chan's voice rose, becoming the sharp yip of a dog on the other side of a fence. "I wanted to take away everything you have! The acceptance you have, the everything you have, the…the all of it! I thought, if I married you, I could finally have it all!"

I'd never seen Mai and Lucie-chan talk before, and I had no way

of knowing how Lucie-chan felt about Mai—although I could form my own opinions from the contents of her rant. But this… This was not how friends talked. Not one bit.

"And then you say you'll marry Satsuki! I can't… I can't forgive that! I can't forgive that at all!"

"…I see now." Mai met Lucie-chan's eyes, and when she smiled, it was full of pain. "I must apologize, because I've done you a great ill. For you see, Lucie, I never planned on marrying you."

Lucie-chan gasped. Her eyes widened.

“I couldn’t tell you because I feared it would only hurt you. But I have my own life, you know. I’ve made my choice—I want to be happy.”

Because of me, I thought. *And Ajisai-san. She chose happiness because she chose us.*

A beat passed. Lucie-chan couldn’t look either of us square in the eyes. Her lip trembled as she said, “C-could you not have been happy with me?”

“You misunderstand, Lucie.” Mai shook her head. “I care for you. I do. You are a precious, beloved friend after my own heart, and I cherish all the time we spend together. Seeing you is always the highlight of my trips to France. You’ve been there for me more times than I can count. I love you, Lucie, as the sister I never had.”

“Then…” Lucie-chan’s voice was so, so thin. Thin as a string of spider’s silk. And if she could just latch onto that silk and pull herself out of this hell—

But Mai would not let her finish. “But I have someone else in my life, and I care about her more than anyone in the world. That’s why—”

Lucie-chan’s head jerked up. “Who? Satsuki?” she demanded.

Mai hesitated for a second too long. Here was the dilemma: Would she tell the truth? Honor Lucie-chan’s heartfelt feelings and tell her everything? But before she could speak—and I think she would’ve done so in the end—someone else answered for her. “Yes.”

A dark figure. Long black tresses dancing in the wind.

“Satsuki-san…” I said.

She came up to stand next to Mai, looping an arm around her waist in a show of ownership. Her eyes were lifeless as they turned to Lucie-chan and me.

“Mai chose me,” she said. “End of story, Lucie.”

Lucie-chan was aghast. Her next question came out as a tiny whimper. “But Satsuki… Why?”

“I won’t apologize to you. I’m not Mai.” Satsuki-san stood tall, stood proud, and looked Lucie-chan dead in the eye. “Making a choice wipes out all other options. It’s a shame, but so it goes. You’re not wanted here, Lucie. Accept the truth and go back to France.”

You're not wanted was a horrible pill to swallow, especially from someone who'd once treated Lucie-chan like a kid sister. Lucie-chan gritted her teeth. She lifted a hand and raised it against the cheek she'd once so joyfully kissed.

Oh my god. She was going to slap Satsuki-san. *Guys, no violence!* I pleaded internally.

But her swing went wide, and Satsuki-san leaped nimbly aside. She began, "Ever the simpleto—"

And she never finished her sentence, because that was when Lucie-chan's backhand whistled through the air and smacked her dead in the face! Daaamn!

There was a satisfying ringing sound. Satsuki-san tottered, her balance failing in slow motion.

Lucie-chan—the very girl who'd just whomped Satsuki-san!—turned and…and…

Ran away sobbing at the top of her lungs…?

Um…? Oh my god. This was a complete clusterfrick.

"I'm so sorry!" I stammered out. "Look, I-I'll catch you both at school."

I paused only long enough to bow frantically before I took off after Lucie-chan. This mess was way, way too big for me to handle anymore, but there was no way I could leave Lucie-chan alone in such a state.

Eventually, she slowed and came to a halt near a convenient guardrail, clutching it for support as she fought to catch her breath. I, none too athletic myself, jogged up next to her and wheezed. Ugh. This was a disaster and no mistake. Why couldn't she have just—I dunno—slugged me? I know—rich, coming from the girl whose recent mental torment stemmed from a case of one person hitting another. But still! What if Satsuki-san turned truant and Lucie-chan never left her fancy apartment again? I couldn't fix a debacle of that caliber! Please, anything but that. *I'd* become a shut-in rather than deal with it.

Okay, Renako. Gotta handle the aftercare. Gotta…help Lucie-chan pick up the pieces… Oh god. What the heck was I supposed to say to her?

“Uh… Hey there!” I began, in the kind of voice you’d use for a baby who’d bawl if nudged so much as a centimeter.

So, naturally, Lucie-chan bawled. “Waaaaaah!”

I yelped despite myself. “Y-you good, Lucie-chan?”

“Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

Oh no. People were giving us looks. We were out in the open! In public!

“Lucie-chan! Lucie-chan, listen to me.” I grabbed her hand with the intent of getting her out of there. “We’re causing a scene! Let’s… let’s just calm down now! Okay? Walk with me. Just a few steps now. Okay?”

“WAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!”

God, she was as loud as an ambulance siren. People fifty kilometers away could hear the lungs on that girl!

By the time I managed to corral Lucie-chan toward a nearby park atop a small hill, the sun had already begun to sink below the horizon. Good thing there was a railing for me to cling to, because a wave of exhaustion hit me all at once. Today was an ordeal and a half. First Youko-chan abducting me, then Lucie-chan roping me into bombing Queen Rose, then bumping into Mai outside that very office, then Lucie-chan declaring her hatred of Mai… Then Satsuki-san showing up… Then Satsuki-san setting off Lucie-chan… And Lucie-chan slapping Satsuki-san…

How was I supposed to show my face in front of either Satsuki-san or Mai tomorrow? I’d shot Mai a message earlier, though. *Don’t worry about Satsuki*, was her response. *Could you keep an eye on Lucie? If you don’t mind.*

I hoped Mai was right that Satsuki-san would be fine and not turn truant. Maybe Satsuki-san was used to getting bodied. After all, she bodied other people all the time.

But that aside… I looked over at Lucie-chan. She’d stopped crying at last, but her eyes were still red and swollen as she looked off into the distance, seeing nothing.

As the lightest touch had set her off earlier, I resolved to broach

my second attempt at conversing very, very carefully. “Lucie-chan?” I said. “Um… Sh-should we start getting you home?”

She didn’t respond at first. She just held onto that same handrail. “Mai and Satsuki were my first friends,” she said.

“…Oh.”

Slowly, with her limited command of Japanese, she told me her story. “I’ve always been alone. I have no parents. I have no siblings. I live with distant relatives. I used to be lonely all the time. But one day…” She paused, took a deep breath, and went on. “But one day the fairy godmother came to *la maison de Cendrillon*.”

She’d seen Lucie-chan in a photo shoot in a local children’s fashion magazine. *She* being Oduka Renée. A fairy godmother by another name. She invited Lucie-chan to come model exclusively for Queen Rose, and just like that, Lucie-chan’s life was flipped upside down. She had friends now—Oduka Mai, Koto Satsuki. She had photo shoots of her side-by-side with the other two girls, and her modeling career took off. She came into her own and awakened to her nascent beauty. She took the world by storm.

“I loved Mai and Satsuki,” Lucie-chan said. “Thinking about them made me smile. I’d never met anyone like them.”

But if that was true, what was that thing she’d said earlier about always hating Mai?

“Satsuki and Mai meant to me…as much as my favorite stuffed animals. Finding a coin in the street. A four-leaf clover in a secret place. The memory of *Maman et Papa* stroking my hair.”

She touched a hand to her hair as she spoke, and I couldn’t help myself asking, “Did you want to marry Mai?”

I regretted the question the moment it was out of my mouth. Even if the answer was yes, there was nothing I could do. I didn’t have it in me to give up my happiness and let Mai go. And yet my heart ached to see Lucie-chan in such pain, and the foolish question slipped out before I could think twice. I wasn’t like Mai, who would apologize but not be swayed from her decisions, and I wasn’t like Satsuki-san, who made the deliberate choice to play the villain. I was just a coward. Someone who didn’t want Lucie-chan to think badly of me. My spinelessness turned my stomach.

But she didn't answer me right away. She looked down at her toes and, when she finally spoke, it was only to say, "I don't know."

"…Oh."

"I don't know if I wanted to marry her."

But then…

"But you were sad when she broke off the engagement, right?" I said. "You wanted to bomb Queen Rose."

"I don't know." She shook her head. "I wanted to do something. I kept feeling more and more *souffrance*, and I thought I should bomb it."

We don't need to let the intrusive thoughts win, but okay.

Her feelings were all over the place, and she revealed them to me in equally scattered bits and pieces. "When Renée called me and told me to come to Japan, I was happy. I didn't question it. I thought that meant Mai liked me lots and lots. But I didn't understand what marriage meant. I still don't. It's not like playing the same game together, is it?"

"I don't think so, no."

"Marriage is a thing for people who love each other. I get that. You do it once, with the person you love best. I…I thought that I… maybe didn't want that. But, I…"

She may have been tall, she may have been well-developed, she may have been beautiful. But deep down, she was still just a kid. Just like how I used to be.

She looked at me, and it was like she was holding on to me for dear life. "I don't know what it was I really wanted."

If… If I had to make a guess, I wouldn't have said Lucie-chan's feelings for Satsuki or Mai were romantic in nature. She said she loved them, but I think she loved them as friends. Mai and Satsuki, in turn, thought of her like a sister. And so when Lucie-chan said she hated Mai, she didn't truly mean it. I'd told my sister I hated her more times than I could count, and while I may have thought I meant it, I really didn't. Of course, I didn't know that at the time. At the time, I was sincere. Or thought I was sincere? Ugh, this was so complicated.

I turned my attention back to Lucie-chan, who was now crouching down and hugging her knees to her chest.

"I told her I hated her," Lucie-chan said. She looked so distressed

that my heart ached. “When I get mad, my head goes boom. It is a very bad trait I have. I feel so…so…‘No more!’ and then the ‘No more’ all comes out.”

“Yeah. I know what you mean.”

Getting so lost, getting so wrapped up in hating yourself that you just want to hurt everybody around you. Blowing up on the people you love. I’d walked in Lucie-chan’s shoes before, and I knew their inevitable destination: horrible self-loathing.

“Lucie-chan?” I said. “What do you want to do now?”

“…To not bomb Queen Rose.”

“Ah. Yeah, please don’t.”

Thank god. No turning into a terrorist on my watch, please!

“Should I say sorry to Mai and Satsuki?”

“Well…”

I groaned to myself. An apology *would* be good if she wanted to patch things up, but considering she was still so emotional, I thought she might need more time to cool off. *Think, Renako, think. We have to give her solid advice. Oh, I know!* I would ask the old me—the whiny, grumpy, shut-in me. She’d understand Lucie-chan!

Hey! Old me! What’s your take on the situation?

Junior high shut-in Renako oozed up out of the darkness and drawled, “Why bother? Let the friendship die. Who needs friends anyway? It’s better to be alone. Other people just cramp your style. People live alone, and they’ll die alone.”

Thank you, Renako, very cool.

That was a bust. Why’d I ever think she’d have anything worthwhile to say? She had no life experience, save what she picked up vicariously by virtue of being terminally online. She was no help at all, and that meant I had no one to rely on but myself.

“Anyway!” I said. “Satsuki-san was asking for it. Anyone would’ve hit her, so don’t beat yourself up about it! When you’re ready to apologize, I’ll come with you for moral support. But for now, why don’t we hold off? Okay?”

Great! Postponing the inevitable! But hey, if time healed all wounds…

Lucie-chan absorbed my advice and nodded, one very small bob of the head. "…Okay."

Ugh. This felt so awkward.

"But…no matter what…this means we can't be friends anymore… right?" she said. The words fell like a fresh wave of tears.

"I…don't know," I said. "I wouldn't be so quick to write Mai and Satsuki-san off just like that."

"Hmm?" She looked up, her teary eyes meeting mine.

Oh, hell. The last thing I wanted was for her to get her hopes up.

"If nothing else," I said, "Mai and Satsuki-san both really care about you. Things might be rough right now, but give it enough time, and who knows? Maybe everything can go back to normal."

I had my reasons to believe that. Neither Mai nor Satsuki-san actively disliked Lucie-chan, as far as I could see. Mai believed Lucie-chan was just another unwitting pawn in her mother's game, and Satsuki-san—I mean, come on. Satsuki-san would not let anyone she hated kiss her on the cheek.

"But…" Lucie-chan mumbled. "I told Mai I hate her."

"…Well, yes. That was a thing that happened."

The light in Lucie-chan's eyes died. Oh no.

"I hit Satsuki…"

"You sure did."

And it'd surprised the heck out of me. I remembered Satsuki-san's reaction to Ajisai-san getting hurt in the interclass basketball game. She swore to crush the opposition so badly they'd never dream of crossing us again, and I still had nightmares about it. But that didn't mean Satsuki-san would be that furious now, right? …Right? After all, she started it!

Lucie-chan looked as lost as if she'd been caught in a downpour without an umbrella. "Oh no… What if Satsuki swears revenge? I am scared of fighting her again. She's very, very strong."

"You're telling me you've fought her?" Lucie-chan had balls of steel.

"Yes. I drew on her face for a prank, and she pinched my cheeks

with clothespins."

"You drew on her face?"

Did Lucie-chan have no fear? Should I have attempted such a feat, Satsuki-san would've stalked me through my next seven lives and cast me down to hell personally.

"I also cut her bangs because I thought it would look cute. She didn't talk to me for five days," Lucie-chan added.

"You cut her hair?!"

I shuddered. The thought alone was going to give me nightmares for life. Edgy gore films had nothing on this level of horror. Well, if Lucie-chan had played barber on Satsuki-san, maybe a slap to the face wasn't so heinous a crime after all. The two could probably make up tomorrow if they really wanted.

"A-anyway! If Mai and Satsuki-san are still mad at you, you can apologize, and I'll come with you for moral support. Got it?"

I forced a smile, the look of a girl who was the polar opposite of moral support.

Lucie-chan was silent for a moment. Then she said, "Renako-sama," and—

Whoa. She enfolded me in a hug.

Her body was soft against mine, the warmth of her seeping through our clothes. But it was…odd. My heart didn't race as it always did when I was in the arms of a cute girl—although possibly, it was already beating so fast after the bit about cutting Satsuki-san's bangs that I just didn't notice…

But truly, I think it was because I saw Lucie-chan as nothing more than a little girl, a girl who'd fought with her friends and said nasty things she didn't mean. A hurt, tantrum-throwing little girl.

Still. She was obviously feeling better, and that was what really mattered.

"Let's get you home," I said. "We're going to freeze if we stay out too long."

Lucie-chan shook her head and refused to let go. I couldn't forget the image of her as that crying, blanketed lump in her apartment earlier.

"…Don't want to be alone?" I said.

She nodded.

"I gotcha." I smiled a little and stroked her hair. It ran through my fingers like soft silk. "Wanna go somewhere, then?"

She lifted her head and looked up at me like a kid would peek up at their mom. "Is that okay, Renako-sama?"

"I can hang out for just a little bit," I amended. "I mean, I'm not going to leave you alone when you're all sad like this."

And besides, it was kind of my fault. She wouldn't have lost her engagement if it wasn't for me. Even if I hadn't been involved, I just didn't want to leave her on her own in a foreign country after a fight with her best friends. If I'd been her, all alone in that big apartment, I'd have fallen to pieces.

"Okay." She brightened up at last. "There is somewhere I've always wanted to go."

Oh ho. "Okay," I said. "Let's go."

"I want a pick-me-up!"

I played along, matching her silly smile. "You deserve one."

"Let's go!"

"Right behind you!"

Whatever cheered her up, right?

We linked hands, hailed a taxi, and sped off to Lucie-chan's desired destination.

…And oh, what a destination it was.

"Hey!" I hissed the minute we were shown to our seats. "What is this?"

Lucie-chan, sitting diagonally across from me, tilted her head. "What do you mean?" Her smile was so bright and innocent it could've belonged to a pretty little doll that didn't know wrong from right. "It is called a hostess club!"

"Yes! My point exactly!"

Holy tonal whiplash, Batman!

In hindsight, I should've realized where she was taking me, but no, I just let Lucie-chan pull me along by the hand, drawing me into this world of glitter and glam.

The ceiling was low and hung with glass chandeliers that glinted in the dim lighting. One wall was taken up by an unbroken panel of smoked mirror, making me feel like Alice in a Wonderland populated by Lucie-chan and two stunning women in even more stunning dresses rapidly approaching our table and curved couches.

"Well, well, what do we have here?" said the one. "Not one, but *two* cute girls? Aren't you just precious?"

"What brings you here, lovies?" said her companion.

Lucie-chan beamed and thrust a hand up in the air. "We are here to have fun!"

"That so? Sounds like you've come to the right place."

"I think so too!"

Me, I felt frozen stiff as a statue. "What the heck?" I muttered under my breath. "What the heck am I doing here?"

Lucie-chan flipped open the menu, by all accounts having the time of her life, and turned her innocent smile on me. "What would you like to drink, Renako-sama?"

What was she all smiley about?! Was she not crying her eyes out just minutes ago? I almost snarled at her before I stifled a gasp and stopped myself. That wasn't me, promise. That was the Youko-chan who lived in my head temporarily taking the wheel.

I tried to smile for her benefit and gave the menu a cursory glance. "Um… Lemme take a look!"

"I was told Japanese people order Dom Pérignon at hostess clubs," Lucie-chan told me before turning to the hostesses. "Could we get Dom Pérignon, please?"

Whoa, what? I had only the faintest idea of what that was, but that faint idea included alcohol, so I leaned in close to Lucie-chan, dropping my voice to a whisper. "We're not old enough!"

"In France, the drinking age is sixteen."

"We're not in France!"

One of the hostesses, overhearing our frenzied whispers, cocked

her head a few degrees. “Did I hear that you girls are underage?”

“Uh…”

“I’m afraid we’ll have to ask you to leave. We don’t serve children…”

“I am twenty,” Lucie-chan said, delivering the most bold-faced lie I’d seen yet.

The hostesses were as taken aback as I was. “…Are you now?”

Sure, Lucie-chan’s appearance could enable her to pass for a full-grown adult, but her vocab… Her simple sentence structure… Surely that made her sound younger.

“And you?” the first hostess asked, turning her attention to me.

“Um.” I felt my eyes begin to bug out of their sockets.

God, just think if they found out I was a kid. They’d tell the school, and by first thing tomorrow, the whole student body would know me as the girl who’d snuck into a hostess club. The ostracization and shame would follow me for life. Worse, what would Mai and Ajisai-san think? Here I was with two beautiful girlfriends, and I dared to fool around with hostesses anyway? The scorn would be scalding.

“You have me,” the Mai in my head protested, hurt. “And yet you go behind my back? Renako, you are a scoundrel.”

“How could you, Rena-chan?” my mental Ajisai-san joined in. “What, do you like older girls? Is that it?”

No! It was all a misunderstanding, I swear! I only came here to chaperone Lucie-chan. *But that still means you went,* the girlfriends in my head admonished, and there was nothing I could do but nod, weeping… It was true. Now I was girlfriendless, deprived of what should have been wholesome high school memories, doomed to die in my bedroom, a recluse and outcast of society for life!

I was done for. I smiled like the dead and put up a piece sign. “Y-you know it. I’m *definitely* in college.”

“Yeah?” The hostess grinned. “Then you’ve come to the right place for a good time, college girl.”

I laughed, but it sounded strained even to my ears. Where had Lucie-chan taken me? Hell, perhaps? Past the point of no return? I could feel the thought creeping up behind me, hands reaching for my neck,

ready to strangle me on the spot.

"Can we have Dom Pérignon?" Lucie-chan repeated. "Dom Pérignon, please!"

What I wouldn't have done to have had half her courage… I grabbed her by the wrist, dragging her down to Earth from whatever la-la land she was drifting off to.

"No! Ix-nay on the alcohol-ay, Lucie-chan."

"In France—"

"Lucie-chan!!!"

"O-okay."

At last, she nodded. Thank god! Houston, we were reaching. Drinking was the final straw; one sip of champagne, and the 0.1 percent of plausible deniability we had went down the drain.

"If you girls aren't drinking, we could get you OJ," one of the hostesses offered. "Maybe a mocktail? We do nonalcoholic ones too."

"That would be great," I said. "Let's do that."

I dropped a bow, and Lucie-chan followed suit, ordering a mocktail of her own. "Please order whatever you want," she added to our companions. "It is my treat."

"You sure, doll?"

"Yes. I have lots of money."

The hostess gals were all too happy to take her up on the offer. (Also, wait—we paid for the hostesses' drinks too? Was that how this was supposed to work?) (Also also, why was Lucie-chan so familiar with the proceedings for hostess clubs?)

"Don't tell me you do this often," I said, prepared for my mental image of her to be tarnished forever.

Lucie-chan smirked. "This is my first time going to a hostess club. But I know that, in Japan, stressed grown-ups go to hostess clubs."

"That sounds like a stereotype."

"But it happens in *Yakuza*."

"Yes, but random dudes running up to mobsters and slugging them *also* happens in *Yakuza*. Don't believe everything you see in a video game!"

One of the hostesseses giggled. “You girls are so sweet. How’d you know each other? You friends from college?”

“No, uh…” I paused. “We’re gaming buddies. And stuff.”

“Yeah? You game a lot?”

I laughed nervously. “Um. Sorta?” Evasive answer of the year award winner over here.

The other hostess, the one sitting next to me, leaned in with zero warning. Hello?

“What kind of games you play?” she asked.

God, that neckline was low. My eyes kept, uh, cleaving to her cleavage. I immediately looked away and managed another nervous laugh. “Mainly, uh, games where you shoot people!”

“Oh, shooters? Get *out*. I’m a huge FPS player myself.”

“Yeah? Wow, what a…um…coincidence!”

The hostess took the lead, wheedling somewhat clumsy conversation out of me with a smile here, a “Mm-hmm! So true, babe” there. She was nodding. She was listening to me. She seemed to be *enjoying* herself.

Oof. Her sweet perfume assailed my nostrils. Could it be… Was it…rose? Okay, I didn’t know my perfumes, but I knew it launched my heart into overdrive. *No, Renako. Don’t get the wrong idea.* She was like this to everyone. She absolutely was *not* interested in me.

“So,” she said. “First time at a hostess club?”

“Yeah. Um. I’m kind of nervous.”

She giggled. “Gosh, you’re cute.” She scooted closer, dissolving the handspan of distance I’d tried to put between us. Hello? “Oh, girl. Don’t be shy. You’re already here. Gotta make the most of it, right?”

I produced a garbled noise of confusion from my throat.

Her knees knocked against mine. Yeep! Was it on accident, or did she do it on purpose? She was like this to everyone; she was like this to everyone. Unless…she wasn’t?! The club was playing a slow, smooth R&B track, but my emotions were anything but slow and smooth. My BPM was topping two hundred with ease.

“Call me Rin,” she said. “And what do I call you, cutie?”

“Huh? Um…!”

Oh heck. Oh hell. Giving her my real name was a one-way ticket to disaster. Thank god the alarm bells in my head were still working—maybe the only thing working, but it counted.

I racked my brain. “Ha,” I began.

“Ha?”

“Ha…runa. Yeah. My name’s Haruna.”

No, Your Honor! It’s not what it looks like! I’m not guilty, I swear! It was an accident!

The panel of jurors that lived in my head—Mai, Satsuki-san, Ajisai-san, Kaho-chan, and my sister—delivered their verdicts as one woman. Death penalty, death penalty, death penalty, death penalty, death penalty. Yup. Give that girl the death penalty!

No! You don’t understand! It’s all Lucie-chan’s fault. I was just trying to do a nice thing. I didn’t want to leave her alone when she was feeling so down. I meant well! I had good intentions, I swear!

“Mmkay, Haruna-chan,” Rin-san said, snapping me back to reality just as the drinks got to our table. “Cheers?”

“Ch-cheers.”

We knocked our glasses together with a clink. I, the fool who’d christened herself her kid sister, smiled like a dead woman walking as I watched Rin-san’s shapely lips kiss the edge of her glass. Ough. Her throat bobbed when she swallowed.

She set the glass down and smiled over the top of it at me. “Mm! That’s good. Sweet of you to buy me a drink, Haruna-chan.”

Ah ha. I forced myself to laugh as she tipped me a wink. I was so screwed. Seriously, what was going on? Was she into me? Or???

I lunged for my drink like my life depended on it, but my overheating head refused to cool off. All five of my senses were going haywire.

“Whatcha think?” she asked, gesturing to the mocktail.

“It’s not bad.”

She giggled, and her hand landed on my thigh. Um???

Her smile traveled closer, all the better for her to get a look at me.

There was this captivating, almost seductive look in her eyes.

"What's it like?" she whispered. "A little…*adult*, you think?"

Mayday! Lucie-chan, mayday! The hostess is into me!

I shot Lucie-chan an SOS signal with my eyes, but she, being attended to by a hostess of her own, was in no state to help.

"And then…!" Huge, heaving sob. "And then my fiancée left me!"

The other hostess was all over her as big, fat tears rolled down Lucie-chan's cheeks. "Oh, that's terrible, baby!"

"It is! It is terrible!"

"Ohh, you poor thing."

"I am! I am a poor thing!" And there went the waterworks all over again.

Now she was hugging the hostess about the waist and blubbering into her lap. And she didn't even have any alcohol in her system! *Girl, what is wrong with you?*

Mayday! Youko-chan, mayday! I understand your struggle now. Believe me; I understand it all too well!

"You know what you need, Lucie-chan?" the other hostess was saying. "A good drink! We're gonna get you feeling all right again. Okay, babe?"

Lucie-chan bawled. "Another round!"

Well…this seemed to be more effective than my attempts at consoling Lucie-chan, so…yay? Although, damn, she really preferred the company of a hostess over the company of a friend like me? But I guess there were some things you could only say to perfect strangers. Which, I got, but also…really? Y'know? Unless maybe this was just the magic of a hostess club at work. I didn't know. Things were making less sense by the minute. What was I doing, trying to play goody-two-shoes and stressing myself out over it? I needed to just, like, chill out. I had tried. I had made an Effort to resist being dragged into the situation. Now I could just let my hair down—lose the dead weight called common sense. Besides, Lucie-chan was paying!

I drained my lime mocktail (tastefully decorated with a sprig of mint) and banged the glass on the table. "Rin-san, get me another!"

"Yasss, now we're talking! Drink up, girl."

“Gotta make the most of it,” I said. “It’s a good life experience!”

“Preach, girl.” Her eyes crinkled at the corners with laughter.

I could feel all the stress of the day melting away under her smile. Oh, sweet bliss… The complete lack of social rejection by Rin-san… The glory of financially secured human contact! Money, what couldn’t you do?

“Who will be the king?” Lucie-chan called out in a singsong fashion.

We were in full party mode now, and party mode meant (apparently) the King’s Game party game. In this game, whoever pulled the “king” chopstick from the bundle Lucie-chan was shuffling got to issue orders to other players based on which numbers they drew.

Lucie-chan pointed the chopstick bundle my way and I, who’d long since given up questioning these turns of events, grinned and drew a chopstick. Ooh. I was the king.

“Yay!” I said. “It’s me!”

“Yes! Go, girl!” Scattered applause from the ladies.

I looked from one gorgeous hostess to the next, then at Lucie-chan, then back again, my mind whirring with potential orders to hand out. Heh heh heh. What would I have them do?

“Let’s see,” I said. “Numbers 1 and 2, I order you to say nice things to the king.”

Lucie-chan and Rin-san’s hands shot up.

“Excuse me,” Lucie-chan said. Rin-san giggled.

“Hmm?”

To my surprise, both shifted seats, scooting in on the couch until they flanked me on both sides. My heart thudded in anticipation.

Lucie-chan drew close to my ear and whispered, “I like you a lot, Renako-sama.”

“Hmm?!”

“You’re *such* a cutie, Haruna-chan,” came the whisper in my other ear.

“Hnngh!”

(It may be good to note that Lucie-chan, who'd failed to get the hint, kept calling me Renako, but Rin-san, ever the pro, kept right on that Haruna train.)

But that's all beside the point. Because…

"Today has been a lot of fun, Renako-sama. Thank you."

"*So* fun," whispered Rin-san in my other ear. "You're going to come back, aren't you? I'll be waiting, baby."

"You're my hero, Renako-sama. I would do anything for you."

"Ooh, look at you! Am I making you blush? D'aww, you're adorable."

Hooooooooooooooooooooh my god. The voices bombarding me from all angles were turning my brain to mush! And then—from both sides—there was a soft squeak of lips and the plush feeling of a kiss upon each of my cheeks. Byeeeeeeeeeeee!

I fell over into the couch cushions, writhing in delicious agony. "Too much! This is too much for me!" I said.

Rin-san laughed out loud with a smile that made her eyes shine.

Curse you, King's Game…! I was not familiar with your dirty tricks!

"Next round!" Lucie-chan said (she hadn't been king once yet). "Next round!" She gathered up all the chopsticks again and passed me the bundle once more.

(Mentally, I was still gasping for breath. That was a close one. I'd almost come down from my hostess-induced bubbly girl high.)

My fingers shook as I reached for a chopstick. This time, I wound up being number three. Once everyone had their role, Lucie-chan said with a bright, beguile-free smile, "I am the king! It is me!" She'd been waiting her turn patiently, and now she smiled with perfect innocence. "Number three!"

Oh snap. I was up.

At great volume, as if she'd had this order in mind from the start, she declared, "I order number three to suck the king's boobies!"

"No!" I almost snapped the chopstick in two. "Not on your life!"

The table erupted with laughter. What?! I wasn't going to—

freaking—suck on her tits!

This was the chaotic note my first-ever hostess club experience ended on, but little did I know the trouble was only beginning.

By the time we walked out of there, Lucie-chan was tripping over her own feet and leaning on me for balance.

"You sure you didn't drink anything alcoholic?" I asked.

She just groaned. "Renako-sama…"

"Seriously, are you okay?"

One swipe of that shiny black credit card had made light of the bill, but when Lucie-chan started to sag no more than a few steps out the door, she was *heavy*. She was skinny, sure, but she still had a good ten centimeters on me. Hauling her back to her apartment was a tall order.

It was pretty late by now, full-on night. I hadn't looked much at our surroundings earlier, but we were, evidently, in a commercial district downtown.

"Probably can't catch you a taxi until we get back to the main roads, huh," I said to Lucie-chan.

"Renako-sama…"

"Yeah, I know. Just hang in there a little longer. Can you walk?"

No response. She turned her big, beautiful eyes on me, and she was perilously close. Hrf. A cute girl.

"Y-yeah?" I said.

Her voice was oh-so faint. "…Could we rest somewhere?"

"I mean…"

We were kind of in public. And commercial district plus rest equaled…

I turned, and wouldn't you know it, but there were indeed nearby lodgings, the fees nicely posted on a signboard outside. They just… happened to be lodgings of a rather adult persuasion.

"Hello?" I turned bright red. "You've got to be kidding me."

Lucie-chan was silent against me. The last vestiges of my higher

powers of reasoning almost caused me to fling her away from me and scream. But I reined myself in just in time, because Lucie-chan had gone unresponsive against me. Yikes. It'd been a long, long tiring day, and Lucie-chan was physically and mentally spent. Wiped. A kindergartner who'd run out of steam.

Someone had to step in and help. Right? …Right?!

Look, to be honest, I didn't even know who I was directing that question to. Maybe the stars, but they sure were silent up there in the frosty winter sky.

I hesitated. "Okay," I said at last.

"Mmn…"

Dragging Lucie-chan, now too wiped to do anything but sigh under her breath, I steered us toward the establishment where one could rent lodgings of a rather adult persuasion.

I couldn't believe it. Here I was, steering myself up shit creek and throwing away the paddle.

***

Once I deposited Lucie-chan on the bed, I started the bath.

As it turned out, the experience from my post-cosplay shoot "wrap party" with Kaho-chan was finally coming in handy. Who'da thunk? I barely even batted an eye as I booked us a room. *Look,* I told myself. *All this means is that you're learning. Amaori Renako is growing up.*

Then I froze with my hands raised in front of me in the position of a potter throwing a vase. Who was I trying to justify myself to this time?

My gaze returned to Lucie-chan flopped on the queen bed. A fluffy rug lay at the bed's foot, the same soft indigo blue as the rest of the room—save for the walls, which were a uniform matte black. The color scheme made the place feel classy, almost calming, at least compared to the last…lodgings of an adult persuasion…I'd stayed at. Still, the silver panels flanking either side of the bed stuck out like a sore thumb, and I couldn't help but notice the bathroom's clear glass walls prevented even a crumb of privacy. This was no ordinary hotel, that was for sure.

I shied away from that thought; I could feel the demon whose name was sanity creeping up on me. I needed to distract myself. I needed to do something Wholesome and Proper. Like putting Lucie-chan's coat up on a hanger. Yes. That would do. Hanging up an expensive coat was perfectly Wholesome and Proper.

But that meant getting it off her first. "Excuse me, Lucie-chan," I said, being gentle so as not to wake her from her doze, a task made more difficult by her sideways fetal position.

Her lips moved slightly. "Renako-sama…"

"Yup, that's me. I'm right here." I tried to sound soothing as I said it, and it must have worked, as Lucie-chan let me maneuver her out of her coat. I got her right arm out of the sleeve first, then her left, and… There. Operation: Coat Acquisition complete.

However…

"Mrrrp…"

"Hmm?"

When I came back from putting it on a hanger, Lucie-chan had risen to a slumped sort of sitting up position, both arms lifted above her head. Which meant…

"Renako-sama…" Lucie-chan's voice was pleading, sweet with sleepiness.

D-did she want me to undress her?

Whoa. Whoa, whoa, whoa. Two young ladies removing each other's clothing in a hotel? I knew what that spelled: major transgression!

I fought back against the wave of guilt that surged through me. Lucie-chan didn't mean it that way. She meant "undress me" the way a little kid did—the innocent way! Even someone with my track record didn't have sex on the brain *every* time I got a girl naked. Sexiness depended on the mood, the facial expression, the tone of voice, the amount of skin on display, even the proximity to said skin…all the myriad factors that created a composite, objective picture of whether or not something was worth interpreting in a sexual manner. I wasn't just, like, going "AWOOGA!" at every girl I came across, and if I had been, I would've deserved to be locked up.

So what I mean is that I was looking at Lucie-chan in a totally

innocent light.

She was stunning, a princess transported into a hotel room bed, but her languid posture bordered on the immoral. Light reflected off her silver hair, evoking the sensual as her dress rode up her legs, curving against her bare and luscious thighs—

But it wasn't sexy! Nope! Not sexy at all!

Sensing I was steering myself into dangerous waters, I shut down any further attempts at thought. This was Fine. Youko-chan probably helped Lucie-chan get dressed too, so this was all perfectly normal for her. I would simply clear my mind. Be a blank slate. Not because my mind was throwing itself into the gutter but just, you know. Because. That's a thing people do, emptying their mind just because. For the lols. For the whimsy.

So, as empty-headed as I was going to get, I grabbed the hem of Lucie-chan's dress and whisked it right off her like a farmer pulling up a turnip.

The expanse of her smooth, pale skin assailed my eyeballs. Such beauty would've sent most hearts a-thumping, but I was too busy being empty to thump. I was literally so blank. There was no Amaori Renako here. Just a void in the shape of a person.

Her dress felt warm in my arms from where it'd clung to her skin; her perfume wafted up to my no—oooo, JK, we're not going there!

I turned! And folded the dress! And put it on the table! Mission complete!

Except it wasn't, because Lucie-chan still hadn't moved. She made a little sleepy noise, her back still turned away from me.

Hmm? My eyes traveled over her. She was in just her underwear and bra now, a black lace affair with the clasp now occupying the focal point of my attention.

Oh god. Don't tell me I had to take that off her too. But hey, surely this was just another perfectly normal thing for her. I could do it. I could! I was her gamer buddy and, moreover, completely empty inside!

My fingers trembled on the clasp. In the upper right corner of my vision, an achievement popped up: First Bra Removed from Another Girl. She wriggled a little, helping me slide the shoulder straps off.

Which meant nothing, I reminded myself. I was no stranger to bras—I put one on every morning too. Although, now that I thought about it, taking a bra off was easier than putting one on… The shaking hands probably didn't help.

But third time was the charm, and now bra-bereft, Lucie-chan rolled over on the bed, facing me, legs outstretched. Her tits were out, and the only bit of cloth left on her was a single pair of panties.

"Mnnh," she mumbled.

…THOSE TOO?

…

I got on the bed. I sat in front of Lucie-chan. I reached for her panties. Blank. I was so very blank. The…blankest? What did blank mean again? Oh god. Oh heck. Oh kill me.

My hands creeped closer. Closer. Toward that swath of pale skin. Toward the delicate pelvis.

Oh no. Nope. No freaking way! (No unless!)

I grabbed Lucie-chan's hand and yanked her upright. "Okay! Into the bath you go! Lucie-chan, you're going to take a bath, and that means you can *undress yourself*. Okay?"

"…Hohkayyy."

I all but charged into the bathroom, dragging limp and languid Lucie-chan behind me. It did not make one bit of difference if *she* meant it in a kindergartner way. When she was built like an enchantress, there was no way to keep me from falling for her spell. No! I couldn't do it!

She sank into the big bowl of the bathtub until the water came up to her shoulders. A contented puff of air escaped her lips.

Looking down on her, I gave myself a big pat on the back. Youko-chan probably did this sort of thing for her all the time, and by god, did my heart go out to Youko-chan for that. A single day of following Lucie-chan around had walloped me in the face with the force of a morning star. I was physically and emotionally drained. Doing this day in and day out? Yeesh! *Good luck out there, Youko-chan—you'll need it! You're something else for putting up with this. Seriously, you might be the best maid alive. I forgive you for biting me; the stress would get to anyone. Here, you can bite me as much as you nee—actually, JK, please don't do that…*

"Renako-sama…"

I turned at the faint murmur that was my name. "Yeah?"

Lucie-chan looked up at me, pleading, as pathetic as a wet cat. "Will you bathe with me?"

"Mmmmmnnngggh…" A deep frown creased my brow.

A bath. A bath with Lucie-chan. Did that… Did that *technically* count as cheating, or…?

I'd had a lot of baths with non-girlfriends, sure. But I hadn't actually been dating Mai or Ajisai-san when I bathed with Kaho-chan. Also, there'd been nothing untoward about Hanatori-san's bath—she was literally just bathing me—and I didn't exactly have a say in the whole Youko-chan thing. This time, I had a choice. To bathe, or not to bathe? Given that I was a willing participant, stepping into the bath with Lucie-chan felt a bit like a slap in the face to Mai and Ajisai-san.

Uhhh. What was the move here, chat?

Mai (or at least mental Mai) shook her head. "Take care of her, Renako. Be nice to her."

Okay, sure. Now wasn't the time to rebuff Lucie-chan, not after her social life had blown up and made her think her two best friends

hated her.

Ajisai-san (or my assumption of Ajisai-san) nodded solicitously. “She’s right, Rena-chan,” she said.

Sure, all right. Ajisai-san was a nice person, and that was exactly what she would say. Or…was it? It kinda felt like I’d been getting mixed signals from her lately.

Just to be on the safe side, I asked her again, “Are you *sure* sure?”

She nodded, her smile radiating warmth. “…Sure. It’s fine.”

What was that pause for, Ajisai-san?!

“Renako-sama?” Lucie-chan said.

Bah. I had to bite the bullet.

I exited the bathroom and pulled off my sweater. *I’m sorry, Ajisai-san,* I swore. *I’ll make it up to you later somehow. I promise! Just…just please turn a blind and adorable eye for a few minutes!*

Now suitably disrobed, I gave myself a quick rinse off in the shower and joined Lucie-chan in the tub.

Just two girls sharing a tub, huh… Look, I didn’t care how many times I got myself into this situation, I was never going to get used to it. And thank god—the moment this became second hat for me, I was done for.

The steam-filled room was silent. Lucie-chan clung to my arm like it was a teddy bear and she was just a little girl. The thing is, she was not—um—little where it counted, and this trapped my arm directly between her two boobs. *She’s my friend. She’s my friend,* I had to remind myself as she leaned her head against my shoulder. I knew she didn’t mean anything by it; she was just…a little too in my personal space. Why did girls have to be so soft, so great to touch? Girls… Soft everywhere, warm everywhere… Attraction or no, feelings or no, the physical sensations alone inevitably evoked a response in me. Ugh, it was enough to scramble my feelings—between the awkwardness, the embarrassment, and this tiny, tiny sense of *rightness*, I felt…

Lucie-chan said under her breath, “I am sorry about today.”

“Oh. Um.”

“I was bossy. And dragged you around.”

Understatement of the century right here. Thanks to her, I’d had

my first-ever hostess club experience. But, I don't know… Something stopped me from responding with a simple "Yup." I sorta smiled, sorta not. "D-don't stress it. When times get tough, everyone needs that one ride-or-die friend, right?"

I had one too. Kaho-chan had been there for me the whole time I was flipping out over Ajisai-san and Mai asking me out. If it hadn't been for her, my current relationship would never have existed. If someone needed me to be there for them in that same way, well, who was I to say no? Helping folks was what kept the world turning. Y'know?

"Renako-sama…" Her voice was breathy, thick with emotion. "Will you marry me?"

"Hello?!" I couldn't help it. If ever there was a screaming moment, this was it.

I swiveled to look at her and got bopped by the sight of her face just centimeters from mine. Moisture clung to her eyelashes, and her eyes themselves were like amethysts trained directly on me.

"Is that a no?" she said. "To being my family…"

"Um, well…!"

I was speechless. I knew she wasn't joking; the tone of her voice made that abundantly clear. I also knew this was probably just a knee-jerk reaction from being hurt, a kind of tunnel-vision latching on to the nearest person who was at all nice to her. But at the same time, she was so resolute. She really meant it. And that meant I needed an answer that was just as sincere—trouble was, what?

The simplest solution would be to pass if off as a joke, playing along by telling her yes now and then forgetting about it later. This was also, without a doubt, the douchebaggiest solution.

On the other hand, I could show up at school and go, "Oh, did I forget to tell? Me and Lucie-chan just got engaged! Ha ha, funny story, right?" Whereupon Mai and Ajisai-san would boot me off the roof, compose the perfect cover story, and get away with literal murder.

On the other other hand, I could say my usual "No freaking way!"—and hurt Lucie-chan even more!

I hated this. I wished the world could take away my right to exercise free will. None of this would have happened had I not foolishly declared that I was fit to steer the course of my own life all by myself,

so there. *Forgive me, God! I'll never say that again, I swear!*

So I opted for option four: stalling for time.

"Girls can't marry each other in Japan," I said.

"They can in France," Lucie-chan informed me matter-of-factly. Well, I was sure they could! How else would Mai's mother have been planning to marry Mai off to Lucie-chan?

My smile was glued on at this point, it was so unnatural. "Do you even have feelings for me, Lucie-chan?"

"Yes."

Just like that! A confession of love right in the kisser! My heart, shot through! Amaori Renako found dead at age fifteen!

"But…" she went on, looking down into her lap.

Oh, there was a but? Then maybe I was alive after all—clinging to life by my fingernails.

"But I have good feelings for everyone who is in my life." God, she sounded so, so lonely. "Mai and Satsuki were my first friends, and that is a good feeling. Renée gave my life meaning, and that is another good feeling. Youko is always with me, and that is a good feeling too. Renako-sama is kind to me, and that is a good feeling. I don't think it matters who I marry. But marrying would make me happy."

Ah. These "feelings" weren't romantic, then. Granted, I didn't think romantic feelings were a prerequisite for marriage either. So long as both parties were cool with it, romance didn't have to enter the equation at all.

"Renako-sama?" Lucie-chan said.

Her chest on my arm was a persistent reminder that I needed to answer her. Urf. I was having trouble focusing—the boobs to the arm didn't help—but all the same, I tried to give her my honest opinion.

"Um… To be honest, I…have 'good feelings' for you too. In a friend sense." I sounded like I was making excuses, and Lucie-chan's face didn't exactly light up. "I've never had a friend I could chat about video games with before, so I was excited to meet you. I know we don't know each other so well, but I hope we can change that."

God, was it hard to speak the truth without hurting the other person's feelings.

“I’d like it if we were better friends. I mean it. I really and truly do.”

But.

“But I can’t marry you, Lucie-chan.”

This wasn’t like telling Mai or Satsuki-san I wouldn’t marry them following that ridiculous bet. That was brushing off bullshit, and this was a whole different beast. Lucie-chan was hanging on to my every word, and I was terrified one of them would accidentally hurt her. But she and I wanted two different things, and that meant I had no choice but to tell her so. That was what it meant to face a problem instead of running away from it.

“I already have someone in my life,” I said. “Someone I like.”

She looked right into my eyes. “More than me?”

Ugh, what an awful question! I hated ranking people in my affections, but claiming I liked her the exact same way as I liked Mai or Ajisai-san was just duplicitous.

“Yes,” I said. “I’m sorry.”

My building guilt insisted I tack on the apology. The little voice in the back of my mind hissed, *If you were just going to apologize, you should’ve told her no from the start!*, which only twisted the knife further.

She must have understood, because she gave me a little nod. “Okay.”

The knife tip wobbled and pointed toward Lucie-chan. I tried to tell myself that she liked Mai and Satsuki-san more than she liked me, so we were equal. Right? Maybe I should’ve said that out loud too, getting all defensive and making it her problem. But I couldn’t. I just couldn’t. I could only sit there in silence.

She shifted just enough so that she could bury her face in my chest.

Which, um. About that.

While I suffered in mortified silence, Lucie-chan hugged me tighter and whispered, “Then I will be your concubine.”

“Hello?”

Could you not *present your own fourth option?* Picking a non-romantic, non-platonic option was only cool when I did it!

She giggled. “I am joking.”

“Are you? Are you really?”

Yeesh! She had some nerve, pulling a joke at a time like this… She was as diabolical as Kaho-chan in her own special way. Giving me emotional whiplash over here!

We sat in silence for a few moments more before Lucie-chan whispered again, “Maman…”

Poor Lucie-chan. She said she had no family, right? My heart went out to her; it really did. I could only imagine what it was like to come home to an empty apartment every day. She wasn’t any older than I was, and yet she had such a heavy burden to bear. I didn’t know how she did it.

Wasn’t there some way we could *all* be happy? That was my problem. I could empathize with anyone and everyone. But even if it was a problem, I wanted Lucie-chan to be happy too.

So, I found myself saying, “Lucie-chan, if you ever really don’t have anywhere else to go…”

She looked up at me when I hugged her back, my embrace like an unspoken promise that I accepted her feelings for what they were.

“Then… Um… We could be roommates, I guess. As friends. That doesn’t mean we’ll be together forever, but…if it means you won’t be lonely for just a little bit, then that’s a positive in my book.”

“Renako-sama?”

Her eyes shone.

Oh no. That’d really just slipped out.

Maybe someday I’d have a chance to introduce Lucie-chan as a friend to Mai and Ajisai-san, but…something told me that would never happen.

Lucie-chan squeezed me tighter. “I knew I liked you for a reason. You are kind to me, Renako-sama.”

“Mmm.”

“If Maman was here, I think she would have been this kind to me too.”

Great, a sudden upgrade to maternal status. A taller kid sister was

one thing, but a taller daughter was too much for me. Besides, she was far too pretty to be any daughter of mine.

"I will think about it," she mumbled into my chest. "About what I really want."

"You do that."

Suddenly, she turned shy. "If it turns out to be bombing Queen Rose, I will come ask you for help."

"I don't know about that one, chief."

Lucie-chan giggled. She buried her face in my chest again, although this time it was less seeking comfort and more from relief. Then—

I yelped and twisted out of her grasp. Hello?! My hands flew up to cover my boobs.

"Did you just put *my nipple in your mouth*?!" I belted with every atom in my body.

"Maman!" Lucie-chan cried, playing the cute little kid.

"Nuh-uh! No!"

Amaori Renako, age fifteen—achievement unlocked: First Time Having Titties Suckled!

We vacated the hotel after a short rest, and who should be waiting outside but, inexplicably, Youko-chan. She took Lucie-chan off my hands and brought her home. Later, she told me she'd been tailing us all day as it was her job to make sure Lucie-chan was safe. You'd think she could've stepped in and bailed me out long before the bathing and boobery, but…! Anyway.

Youko-chan, seeing that I was ready to give her what for, promised me she'd make it up to me later. She'd better! All I'm saying is, she'd better!!!

Oh, and before I forget—Lucie-chan did, eventually, decide on what she truly wanted, and that served to alter the fates of Mai, Satsuki-san, and me in a major way. But that's a story that'll have to come later.

***

Oduka Mai sat alone in the darkness of her bedroom, on the edge of her large bed, until the door opened, spilling a dim ray of light across the floor and admitting the entrance of one Koto Satsuki in a bath robe.

"You can't still be worried about her," Satsuki said.

Mai made a noncommittal grunt. Her friend sat down beside her, toweling off her hair. "We *did* decide this together," Satsuki reminded her.

When Mai spoke, it was as if it took great effort to wrench open those heavy lips. "Yes. We decided to trick Maman and hurt Lucie."

The slap mark had long since faded from Satsuki's cheek—as genuine as Lucie's anger was, she didn't have it in her to seriously wound a friend.

"Yes," said Satsuki. "That is the price you must pay. But you'll pay it, and you'll still want to be with Amaori, won't you?" Mai couldn't quite meet Satsuki's eye, a fact that didn't escape her friend. She frowned. "You have a crush on her. That's what your 'feelings' mean to you, don't they?"

"Satsuki, I—"

Whatever Mai wanted to say, Satsuki would never know, as she steamrollered on. "What? Don't tell me you want to back out now."

She caught Mai's eye and found Mai staring directly at her. Her expression was somber. It telegraphed determination.

"If that's what you want," Satsuki said, "then suit yourself. It doesn't affect me one way or the other. If you think 'love'—silly, romantic love—is something worth tricking your own family and hurting your oldest friends over, then say so. Admit it."

Mai hesitated. "…It is," she said at length. She folded her hands in front of her chest and squeezed them together. Determination leaked from her mouth in the form of words. "Now that it affects you, I have no choice but to keep going. I must follow my heart. I must see my dream come true."

Satsuki fell silent. To herself, she thought*, Really? Is that* really *only how far you'll go?* A dark flame kindled in her eyes. If Mai was so intoxicated by her—ugh—romantic feelings, then she needed to be ready for more. More consequences, more sacrifices, more pain.

Satsuki stroked Mai's cheek and said the name that'd graced her lips hundreds of times, thousands of times, innumerable times since she was but a child. "Mai."

Her face drifted closer, and Mai could not tear her eyes away. Just said—"Satsuki." Just like that, so very, very gentle. Accepting Satsuki just as she was.

Satsuki's breath caught in her throat. She grabbed Mai by the shoulder and pushed her over, tumbling her oldest friend until she lay with her back against the bedsheets, staring up at Satsuki.

"We're engaged," Satsuki said. She bit her lower lip. "You understand, we… We have to do *something*, or else they'll all think we're lying."

What would Mai say? If Satsuki told her the price was letting Satsuki take her, what would Mai say? Satsuki wanted to know. Oh, she wanted to know so badly.

But all Mai said was "Oh." Satsuki saw her own reflection in the depths of Mai's eyes. "All right."

All right. *All right?* What, was that a go-ahead? When Mai was dating Renako? And yet she'd let Satsuki kiss her? Claim her lips? Were her "feelings" for Renako so strong? Or, conversely, *was that all they were?*

Mai closed her eyes under Satsuki's incredulous gaze. Giving in. Letting Satsuki take her heart, if Satsuki should so wish.

Satsuki's own heart raced. Deep, deep inside, there was a sound of a heart screaming out in pain.

"…N-never mind." She leapt up and whirled away. "I was just testing you. You're not likely to let anything slip, not if you're *that* committed."

She slipped off the bed. "I need the hair dryer." She made to run from the room, but a voice behind her made her stop in her tracks.

"Satsuki?"

She didn't turn to look.

"Thank you. I appreciate what you're doing."

It was as if Mai could see right through her to the inner workings of her heart.

“…You disgust me,” Satsuki spat, and she departed.

Chapter 3:
There's No Freaking Way We Can Be a Throuple!
(Unless…?)

"AND WITHOUT FURTHER ADO," Ajisai-san began, prefacing her announcement with a hand clap and a smile, neither of which she seemed too happy about, "I hereby call to order the first meeting of Cheer Up Rena-chan and Me After Mai Dumped Us Anonymous. Yippee."

"Wait, that's what we're here for?" I said.

And beside me, the Dumper herself said, "My, my. Touché." She smiled indulgently at us like we were nothing more than a couple of rambunctious puppies.

Uh, guys? We'd only just begun, and already the tension was palpable. I felt the urgent need to bail us out of this awkwardness, so I stuck my finger in the air and said, "I think you mean *Mai, Mai*, am I right?"

The ensuing silence was deafening.

Hmm. Maybe they just hadn't heard me. "Ahem! *Mai, Mai*, right? Ha! Got 'em…!"

No reaction from Ajisai-san or Mai both.

"Guys? She said 'My, my,' so I said 'Mai, Mai'… Get it? Like, it's a joke? Wordplay?"

Nada and nothing. Ah ha. Maybe I was better off dead!

"So, Mai-chan," Ajisai-san said, clearing her throat and steering the conversation around me like nothing had happened (using a Phoenix Down on Amaori Renako in the process), "you're going to treat us like princesses today. Got it?"

She pointed straight at Mai with a cute, snappy little gesture.

Mai placed her hand over her heart and aimed one of her usual elegant smiles in Ajisai-san's direction. "But of course. I really must apologize for all the emotional turmoil I've caused you both recently. Thank you for giving me a chance to make it up to you."

Oh. So there wasn't any tension after all. The only heart palpitating (kill me) was mine.

Anyway, yeah—today, Mai, Ajisai-san, and I were on a date. That's right. A three-way date. Our first plan was to hold a redo of the amusement park date Mai hadn't been able to join us on (work got in the way), but Mai said the least she could do after putting Ajisai-san and I through the wringer was plan our group date. Thus, she held the reins today.

She and I (plus Satsuki-san) had talked through the Lucie-chan issue, and we decided it would be best to give her some space for a little while. Didn't have to tell me twice, but hey! Satsuki-san also didn't appear (outwardly) to be too, too upset, so that was another good thing.

Now, my two girlfriends and I could relax and enjoy a slow, leisurely stroll through early December Tokyo. It'd been ages, I reflected, since we'd had an opportunity to enjoy time with each other. What with everything going on, we hadn't had a minute to so much as breathe for what felt like weeks.

Ajisai-san and Mai were dressed for the weather, Mai in a posh, full-length jacket and Ajisai-san in a puffy coat with a flared skirt waist. The killer combo of elegance and cuteness was a sight to behold. The two were stunning. Oh, and what was I wearing? Just a duffle coat I bought back in junior high. I didn't have enough money to go buy myself a new winter wardrobe. Next time I got my allowance, (provided there weren't any games I wanted) for sure!

"Where are you taking us?" I asked Mai.

She chuckled. "Somewhere just delightful, of course."

Ah. Her Mai-ness was showing.

So I turned to Ajisai-san and asked, "And what does that mean, do you think?"

"Hmm. Knowing Mai-chan, I bet something like a swanky hotel café."

"Oh, no, Ajisai-san," I, the expert on everything Mai, remonstrated with a wag of my finger. "You don't know a thing. Mai would never take us somewhere we plebeians could even conceptualize. She'll find a way to exceed our expectations in every way possible."

"Every way possible?!" Ajisai-san clenched her fists, gasping in

wonder at the thought.

Mai smirked. “So, what is your guess, Renako?”

I sized Mai up. If she was smiling oh-so confidently like that, that could only mean—

“A cruise on a luxury liner,” I declared.

“Whoa,” said Ajisai-san.

“A tour around the world!”

“Oh no! I didn’t bring my passport.”

“Never fear. I’m sure Mai’s already got us spares.”

“But what about school?”

“Never fear! I’m sure Mai’s already arranged for distance learning.”

“Oh my goodness!”

In the background of Ajisai-san and I hyping ourselves up, Mai muttered to herself, “Intriguing. That *would* be an option. I suppose I’ll have to try that next time.”

“Please don’t, actually!” I said.

“Same here. I couldn’t leave my little brothers alone that long either,” Ajisai-san said.

“Then why don’t we invite your whole family along, Ajisai?” Mai said. “I’m sure they’d have a splendid time as well.”

“Ooh.”

Mai smiled in genuine joy at Ajisai-san’s happy sigh of wonder. Problem was, Mai was the kind of person who couldn’t be swayed from doing something once she’d set her mind to it—and in the context of a luxury cruise, that was a scary thought!

“Must be nice to have money,” I said. “With enough cash, you can just spread happiness, huh?”

“Yes, but money can’t buy happiness *all* the time,” Mai corrected. She gestured to Ajisai-san and me with a grin. “After all, all the money in the world couldn’t have bought me the two of you.”

Ajisai-san giggled. “That’s true.”

Well, I don’t know if I’d go that far! Ajisai-san could speak for

herself, but I felt like *I* could be bought with money. A new PC with a next-gen graphics card? All the gadgets and gizmos for a pro gamer setup? Hubba, hubba!

But this was clearly not the time for mercenary attitudes, so I just went, "Aww, yup!" I didn't want to make it sound like I was dating Mai for her money. It was at precisely that moment that I was hit by a flashback of a certain happiness bought with money not a few days past —a dimly lit club, a beautiful woman with way too much cleavage, a hand on my thigh, a sexy grin approaching my ear—

I screamed at the top of my lungs, startling the heck out of Ajisai-san.

"R-Renako?" Mai said, concerned.

I stared back at them both, wide-eyed. "Huh? What's the matter?"

"What do you *mean*, what's the matter?" Ajisai-san said.

"You just screamed," Mai pointed out.

"I did? Well, uh—everyone screams sometimes. Ha ha! That surprised me too, honestly!"

Both of them looked at me like I'd lost my last marble.

"M-Mai-chan, is Rena-chan okay?" Ajisai-san whispered.

"I'm not sure… Renako, you do know that if you need to talk to us, we're always here for you."

Oh no. Now they were genuinely concerned for me.

"No worries!" I said. "I'm A-okay! Perfectly normal! Whoo!"

Oh no squared. Ajisai-san and Mai knew me too well to trust me. Rather, they trusted me so well that they knew something wasn't right. Yeah. Yeah! Forgive the brag, but in the course of us dating one another, I'd actually won a bit of trust from both Mai and Ajisai-san. Sure, I may have had…my moments…but it still counted! Rather than suffer in silence with my secret, I knew it was better to fess up now. They trusted me. They'd know that I would have had my reasons for doing all the things I did with Lucie-chan.

Okay, practice run.

"Oh, it's nothing! Just, the other day, Lucie-chan and I pretended to be college students and went to a hostess club together. Oh, and did I mention, I gave them my sister's name instead of mine? But it was fun! I played the

King's Game for the first time ever! Then, after that, Lucie-chan and I went to a love hotel, got naked, and took a bath together. But we're just friends, so it doesn't mean anything."

Perfect! How's that? You trust me, right? You know I didn't do anything untoward, right?

Nope. No freaking way.

Why, why, why had I done all that? Why, God, why? Why did I make such a fool of myself when I liked Mai and Ajisai-san?

"Oh, and now Rena-chan's gone silent and is bashing her head against a telephone pole…"

"While smiling, no less…"

I turned back to them, crying inside (the smile didn't reach my eyes), and said, "I'm sorry, gang. I just can't do it. I'll talk about it one of these days."

"O-okay," said Ajisai-san.

"My goodness, Renako, what happened…?" said Mai.

I grabbed one hand from each girl in my feeble grip. Their hands felt so warm in mine… If only the heat could sterilize the disease in my putrefying heart.

Oh, and since we're on the topic of Lucie-chan, I should inform you that I hadn't cut contact with her entirely or anything like that. She said she had some work to wrap up here in Japan before she could go home, and that was her sole focus at the moment. Once it was done, whether she wanted to stay longer was up to her. I, personally, would've liked her to stay, but that was just my selfishness talking. I didn't want to lose a newly made friend—and besides, that meant we could go to more hostess clubs! Wait. No, no, no. I needed to watch out; I was close to losing track of my true priorities. What was wrong with me? Had the hostess club irreparably broken me? Would I never be the same Renako again?

I groaned. "Mai? Ajisai-san? I need you to hit me. Just slap me across the face as hard as you can. I shouldn't be allowed to so much as hug you unless you guys mess me up."

"Are you misquoting Dazai's 'Run, Melos'…?"

"Something bad must have happened indeed," Mai said.

She and Ajisai-san exchanged nods.

“On the count of three,” said Mai.

“Wait, we’re actually hitting her?”

“Well, we can’t have her acting like this all day. It’s hardly conducive to a proper date.”

“I mean… You have a point, but…”

Before Ajisai-san could make up her mind, Mai lashed out—yipes! I know I was the one who asked for it, but I wasn’t ready!—and—and—! Well, she didn’t slap me, but she pinched my cheek hard.

“Ow!” I said.

She giggled. “Your turn, Ajisai.”

“O-okay. Sorry, Rena-chan.” Ajisai-san took the other cheek, giving it a more reserved pinch.

Both let go at the same time. Ow.

“Are you okay?” Ajisai-san asked.

My cheeks smarted, but I rubbed the sting away, chortling to myself all the while. Nothing like a little pain to snap me back to my senses! Ah, punishment. The banisher of all corrupting vices.

“Thank you,” I said around my audible cackles. “Ooh, that hurts. I love it.”

Ajisai-san, now more than a little freaked out, said “Wh-why are you laughing…?” She leaned over to whisper in Mai’s ear. “Psst! What do we do if we awoke some weird fetish in her?”

“We’ll simply have to try and be understanding.”

“Oh no. I mean, okay.” She clenched her fist, summoning her resolve. Which was adorable, if misguided. I wasn’t, like, suddenly into BDSM or anything. But if Ajisaidistic-san took a page from Satsuki-san’s book and started walking all over me and telling me what a bad, bad girl I was… Yo?

No, not really. I think that’d just be painful and not especially sexy. But then again, Ajisai-san was such an angel. Wouldn’t it be something to witness her acting so completely out of character? Then follow it up with a little “Ooh, my gosh. I’m so sorry, Rena-chan. Did that hurt?” And her fussing over me for the aftercare? Look, I’m just

saying…

"Ah," Mai said, pulling my mind out of the gutter. "We're here."

Ajisai-san gave the unremarkable building a dubious glance. "Some place to host a luxury cruise."

Having performed the necessary rites of purification to excise all unwholesome thoughts and regain my better judgment, I shook my head and said, "Nope. We can't let our guards down, Ajisai-san. There could be a secret tunnel in the basement that leads to the docks."

"That sounds extremely illegal, Rena-chan."

Mai giggled. She steered us inside and into the elevator, taking us up to a locked room on the fifth floor. On the other side of the door was, again, a completely unremarkable apartment. One bed, one bath, and a big ol' kitchen on one end of the living space.

"Is this an hourly rental place?" Ajisai-san asked.

"It is." Mai exuded palpable glee at the thought of giving us a lovely surprise; it was so heartfelt that it made her dazzling smile even more stunning. "I thought it'd be lovely to have ourselves a gyoza-making party."

"Gyoza-making?" I said.

"Party!" said Ajisai-san.

Compared to the luxury cruise, this was a whole other surprise—an even bigger one!

All the ingredients were waiting for us on the dining table.

"Did you buy all this yourself?" Ajisai-san asked Mai as she hung up her coat.

Mai beamed. "I did. I came in early this morning myself to put everything together. It was such fun."

"So, why a gyoza-making party?" I asked. It felt kind of rude to question her, but I was understandably curious—it was such a low-key activity that it felt out of character for the perpetually high-key Mai.

Mai put a hand to her mouth, and even that looked Instagram worthy. "I saw it on TV recently and thought it'd be such fun to try."

My words died in my throat. That…was as silly as silly reasons came. Truly, a thing only an airheaded Queen Bee (I'm being mean)

would think to say. But honestly? It was cute to see Oduka Mai doing something because all the other kids were doing it. It was really, really cute.

But I couldn't ignore the elephant in the room. "Why couldn't we have done this at your place? Why'd you have to go and rent a freaking apartment for us?"

"Doesn't this make for a better surprise?"

"What is with you and trying to surprise people all the time?"

I couldn't deny that I found this trait endearing, though. Mai was endearing as a rule. And cute. And adorable. The mental image of her bustling around to set up a gyoza-making party, brimming with excitement at the thought of doing this for us, gave me a serious case of the warm fuzzies. I couldn't help but admire how Mai gave her all in everything she did. *Guys, it is currently real Mai loveposting hours.*

I wriggled out of my coat while Ajisai-san disappeared off into the kitchen area, and by the time I was done, she'd already gotten her hands washed and all the grocery bags on the table unpacked. Talk about speedy.

"I don't think I've ever made gyoza from scratch before," she said to Mai.

"Nor have I. I believe we have all the essentials, but should we run out of anything, I'd be happy to pop out and get more."

I eyed Mai's purchases: ground pork, cabbage, chives, green onions, and gyoza wrappers.

"We should begin by making the filling," Mai said. "Correct?"

"Mm-hmm," said Ajisai-san. "Wish I'd known to bring my apron."

"Don't worry. I bought enough aprons for us all. See?"

"Oh, those are adorable! Yay, thank you."

Mai and Ajisai-san's smiles and apron-tying chitchat absolutely killed me. The domesticity! The cuteness! The…the uselessness of me sitting here mooning; I needed to put on my apron and help too!

I fiddled with the drawstrings while the other two carried on with the prep behind me.

"Right! Mai-chan, what do you want to cover?" Ajisai-san said.

"We only have the one knife and cutting board, so would you mind doing the honors? I'll handle the rest."

"Sounds like a plan."

I watched Ajisai-san wash the veggies and Mai dump the ground pork into a bowl. Both of them got to work, and my stomach sank. Oh no. I knew this sensation all too well: the sensation of standing at the elbow of my much more skilled partner in cooking class, watching every second tick by with nothing to do! No! I hated being jobless! *Please, someone, give me some sort of work to do!*

"Uh," I began, feeling not at all confident. "Is there anything I could do to help?"

Ajisai-san smirked in derision. "What's that? Oh, come off it, Rena-chan. We all know you're totally useless." She snickered. "You might as well sit there and watch." She chortled.

Except none of that ever happened and that was just my trauma talking.

The real Ajisai-san, an angel in the flesh, smiled not unkindly at me over the rhythmic *chop chop chop* of her knife. "Since you offered, I'll give you one of the most important jobs of all. While I make the filling, I want you to find me a big, big plate to put all of our gyoza on. Can you do that for me?"

There was something about her speech that made it sound like she was addressing a little kid (probably a byproduct of her home sitch, tbh), and I, assuming the role of her baby sis, raised my hand obediently. "You got it! Renako is on the job."

I brought the plate back, weeping internally all the while. Ajisai-san was *so* nice. She always found a way to make everyone feel like they were part of the group. God, what I wouldn't have given to have known Ajisai-san back in junior high. Although, had that happened, lord knows I would've become totally dependent on her for my mental health. I'd have followed her around like a duckling on break and lunch, trying to be with Ajisai-san 24/7. If she so much as attempted to go anywhere by her lonesome, I'd find her and come with. If she went to hang out with other friends, guess who'd show up? *Hey, it's me! I'm here too! Count me in.* God, can you imagine? Horrifying! A completely unhealthy relationship!

I liked Ajisai-san a whole awful lot, but there was such a thing as

too much. I didn't want to treat someone like an object.

But if it was reversed? If Ajisai-san shadowed me 24/7? Oh, hell yeah. Ajisai-san could depend on me for her mental health all she wanted! But Ajisai-san (unlike me) was a functional human being, so this fantasy was doomed to remain just that. The end.

Ajisai-san snagged me for my next mission just as I'd finished setting the plate out, once again impressing me with her powers of child wrangling. A real guardian angel of the kitchen, she was.

"Can you make some rice for us?" she said.

"Sure can!" I said back, louder than was strictly necessary.

I turned to the rice cooker and…froze.

Look. I have to make a confession. You might want to sit down; it's shocking. You ready? Okay. *I've never actually made rice before!* How… How did one make rice? Rice. Yes. If I stared at it long enough, perhaps it would cook itself.

Well, crap. A cold sweat began to trickle down my spine. I did *not* want the others to find out I, at age fifteen, had not once made rice in my life. Ajisai-san helped cook all the time, surely. Me? I barely helped my mom once in a blue moon.

My heart sank. One would expect a gyoza-making party to be more of a joyous affair, but this was more like a hell-of-my-own-making party. A flush-out-the-girl-who-can't-cook-and-kill-her-where-she-stands party.

Maybe I could pretend I had a sudden stomachache and go hide in the bathroom until all the cooking was over. I could definitely camp out on the toilet long enough for the others to make rice. You know what? That wasn't a bad idea at all. Anything was better than the others learning my shame.

But wasn't it more shameful to duck and run at the first sign of trouble? That was one of my worst habits, I knew. Ugh.

I told myself it was fine. I told myself Ajisai-san wouldn't leave me over a little uncooked rice. She wouldn't, right? Totally not! Right!

This was as brave as I was ever going to get, so I turned to Ajisai-san, still in the middle of her own task, and said, "Uh, hey? Sorry, I… Um. I've never actually made rice before."

Ajisai-san's hand on the knife stopped, and she looked up.

"So," I said. "Um." My voice flagged. "Could you…show me… how?"

"Hmm? You've never done it before?" She smiled. "Okay. Let's do it together."

"O-okay!"

Yeah. Yeah! There was a first time for everything. This wasn't anything to be *that* embarrassed about. Right? And Ajisai-san and Mai would never laugh at me. I was so busy trying to make myself seem cooler than I was that I never stopped to consider how that made me nothing but a stand-in for a real person. I hated showing weaknesses; they scared me. But showing weaknesses was much, much better than constantly running away from them… Right?!

Ajisai-san washed her hands, grabbed the rice cooker's pot, rinsed it out, and scooped up a heap of rice with Mai's measuring cup.

"Let's use…about two scoops," she said, feeling it out as she went. "Like this."

"Okay. Got it."

"Add water up to the line and wash the rice like this. You'll want to repeat this process until the water is no longer cloudy."

In order to teach me, she stood behind me with both arms reaching around in an odd facsimile of a hug. Eep. My heart, which had been on high alert due to shame just minutes before, revved up for a whole other reason. I could feel Ajisai-san pressing against me, the heat of her body reaching mine through our clothes…

Wait. Except I was just a kid who couldn't cook rice trying to learn. To evolve into Amaorice Cooker Renako. *Listen to her instructions, me! Listen!*

"You're doing such a good job," she cooed. "You're a natural, Rena-chan."

Oh no. Not the sultry whisper in the ear. This was bad, bad news for me. I couldn't help it! Ajisai-san's voice was just so silky smooth! Seductive, even!

I suffered through the rest of the rice washing with Ajisai-san steering me like a hand puppet. It was, I reflected, my first group

project with Ajisai-san. I cackled to myself, then abruptly switched tracks; this was no time to celebrate. Her voice still throbbed in my eardrums. Oh god. Oh heck.

Anyway! Time to cook that rice. I pressed the Quick Cook button on the rice cooker with an oh-so satisfying snap. And that was it. I'd just made my first-ever pot of rice! And now, to commit it to memory, I'd start making rice for the whole family too. Wouldn't Mom be surprised? And to think, it was so simple all along! You just washed the rice, measured out the water, and pressed a button. Easy as pie!

Mai wandered over amid my gloating. "Having fun?" she said.

"I dunno. Maybe!" Pride put me on the defensive.

"Would you like to come knead the ground pork with me?"

"Sure!"

I could cook rice now. What couldn't I do? Fear held no meaning for me anymore.

"It's just like making hamburgers," I told Mai, with authority.

"Oh? Have you done that before?"

"Nope!"

She chuckled like something about that exchange was amusingly endearing. What?

"Here," she said. "We'll mix in the vegetables Ajisai-san was kind enough to cut up for us, add the seasonings, and knead it all together."

"You got it, boss."

In went the cabbage, the chives, the green onions, and all the other green stuff. Mai drizzled some liquid seasoning-sauce mix on top and then submerged her hands in the glop of meat. Oduka Mai, making something as pedestrian as gyoza? Now this was surreal.

"Come on, Renako," she said. "You too."

"Oh. Right."

But how to position myself? I tried to squeeze in between Mai and the bowl, tentatively reaching for the meat, but—

"No, no," Mai cut in. "Here."

"Huh?"

Her arms snaked around me, hugging me from behind. The return of Amuppetori Renako, apparently.

"I don't need someone to show me how to *mix ground meat*," I told her.

"No, no. There's a trick to it; I saw it on TV. Like this. We want to scoop the meat in a circular gesture, then squish it between our fingers."

"Uh. Okay?"

Oh no. In any other situation, I could've told Mai she was full of it—but she had me beat in her knowledge of meat, removing my ability to talk back. I didn't know the first thing about making gyoza.

She gripped me tighter as she whispered into my ear, "That's it. Slower. Slower. Gently now, Renako. Yes. Just like that. Go on. Make it nice and wet, now."

Um??? You're hearing this too, right? This odd sexual undertone wasn't just my imagination, right? Perving out over Ajisai-san was a cardinal sin, but perving out over Mai was kind of an inevitability, to be honest. She was gorgeous, stunning, and adorable all in one, to say nothing of her being my partner in kissing crimes. Whenever I showed any sexual interest in her, she had the adorable habit of going all bashful, which made that endeavor all the more enticing. And brain-warping. Mai was always going on about wanting to engage in physical contact with the girl she had feelings for, so you can't blame me for letting that go to my head.

No, Amaori Renako! Keep it in your pants! The only thing on your mind right now should be making the best gyoza ever.

But that was damn difficult when Mai was in my ear going, "Yes, Renako, just like that. Ooh. Careful now. Not so hard. Yes, oh yes, you're doing such a good job."

Was making gyoza secretly an R-rated activity and no one'd told me?

I was on the verge of letting my lower brain take the wheel when Ajisai-san remarked, "Hmm? Rena-chan, why're you all red?"

"Eeep!"

Not Ajisai-san looking at me when I was at my most lecherous!

“Wh-wh-who, me?” I said. “I-I-I-I’m not red! Maybe it’s just too hot in here!”

“If anything, I’m kind of cold…”

“Yeah? Then I must have a naturally high body temperature.”

She didn’t respond. She just—“Gotcha.”

“Wagh!”

Now she was hugging me too?! Where did that come from?

“I wanna help mix,” she said into one ear.

“Oh dear,” Mai murmured into the other. “We should’ve gotten a bigger bowl.”

“Gotcha! Gotcha, Rena-chan.”

Giggle, giggle. Chuckle, chuckle.

Being the meat in the Mai and Ajisai-san sandwich was not unlike being the filling of a piece of gyoza. And just like that lump of ground pork, I, too, was doomed to fry in the engulfing heat.

Seriously, making gyoza wasn’t the new equivalent of going to second base, right? Right???

I slumped back in my chair, replete. “Man,” I said. “I’m stuffed.”

The massive plate of gyoza that sat in the middle of us now sat gyozaless, and my amazing rice was gone with it.

This whole experience, man. It’d been so fun. Even stuffing the wrappers was a blast. Mai’s gyoza were true works of art, and Ajisai-san’s were filled to near bursting with yummy goodness. Mine, well—I was not the greatest with my hands, so mine sometimes fell apart. But that was fine too, because it meant you could tell with a glance who made what, which was a whole other form of fun. I told Mai and Ajisai-san I’d take responsibility for my shitty work and eat the ones I made, but they didn’t care. They were actually glad to eat my gyoza, and seeing them enjoy the fruits of my labor was…nice. Really kinda nice. If it was with Mai and Ajisai-san, messing up didn’t seem so bad.

We had fun with it, adding kimchi here or cheese there, until we were all so stuffed none of us could manage another bite.

“That was so fun,” I said.

“I’m very glad to hear that,” said Mai. She swapped me a grin.

Funny how she never looked bloated no matter how much she ate. She was just built different, I guess.

“Thanks for putting this together for us, Mai-chan,” Ajisai-san said from her side of the table.

“You’re quite welcome. But really, you needn’t thank me so much. It was something I wanted. I thought it’d be such fun for us all to try together.”

“It sure was.” Ajisai-san leaned back in her seat to stretch. “Mmn. My stomach hurts.”

I laughed. “Same.”

Even stuffed to the gills, though, Ajisai-san still looked as pretty as ever. The little food baby poking out through her shirt made her look especially round and cute. God, what I wouldn’t give to touch her belly —wait, that was kinda pervy.

I gave my head a vigorous shake to banish the visions of Ajisai-san sticking out her bare tummy. *Careful, Renako, careful.* It was a close shave, but I, being no pervert, was safe. I was *close* to being a pervert, but not quite. The distinction mattered!

I rushed to change the subject. “Cooking’s a lot of fun, don’t you think?”

“Mm-hmm!” Ajisai-san agreed. She smiled at my not especially insightful comment. “Cooking’s always better when you’re thinking about a special someone.”

“Like the time you made me that cheesecake?”

“Yup.” She closed her eyes in free, easy joy. Urrrgh, she was so cute. I wuvved her.

Mai, not to be outdone, butted in. “*I* kept my special someones in mind while I cooked too.”

“Oh ho,” I said. “A new challenger steps into the ring.”

“Oh yeah?” Ajisai-san shot back. “Well, the whole time I was cutting that cabbage, I was picturing the two of you. So there.”

“That’s actually kinda creepy,” I pointed out. “Picturing us under the knife and all.”

Ajisai-san laughed. “True.”

The whole thing was… Man. So, so peaceful. So nice.

And like she’d read my mind, I heard Mai say under her breath, “This *is* nice.” Like she was trying to win an argument with herself, almost. “I didn’t make the wrong choice after all.”

Ajisai-san heard that too, and for the space of a second, I saw the need to speak up flicker across her face. But then it was gone.

I, in turn, wasn’t sure what to say next, but Mai beat me to it anyway. “I think,” she said, turning to us both, “we need to have a talk.”

The look in her eyes was serious. Ajisai-san and I shifted forward in our seats.

“Yeah,” Ajisai-san said. “We do.”

Determination was knit into the line of Mai’s jaw. “I am terribly sorry about this whole debacle of the marriage question. You two have been caught in the crossfire most unduly.”

“No, it’s fine,” Ajisai-san said, and I agreed. Mai had apologized to us already—multiple times, really. And she was as much a victim in this as we were. Neither Ajisai-san nor I felt right blaming her.

But I think Mai felt responsible for that lack of enmity on our parts too, because she shook her head. “No. This is an issue that should’ve not left the confines of my family circle. This is a personal problem—one I am responsible for. Thus, I’ve come to a decision.”

Her voice grew stronger, like she was about to drop a proclamation of historic significance. “I want to be with you two, whatever the cost. I pledge to do whatever it takes, whatever is in my power. Our time together today has only reaffirmed my feelings. I care deeply for you both; I truly do. I adore you both romantically.”

Ajisai-san wavered, but then her hand drifted up to point at herself. “Both?” she said. “You mean…including me?”

Mai nodded in one large, affirming motion. “Yes. But of course.”

Ajisai-san and I both squeaked in surprise. Seriously? Mai had romantic feelings for Ajisai-san too? When did this happen?

“Rather, I should be asking you,” Mai said, noticing our shock. “How could anyone date Ajisai and not fall head over heels for her?”

“Oh, gosh,” Ajisai-san demurred, but I just nodded. She was right. I couldn’t argue that one. Had Ajisai-san been a complete stranger, my bride-to-be as arranged by my parents, I would’ve fallen for her on the spot. I didn’t need to think twice about it.

“Yes, the love I feel for you is not the love I feel for Renako,” Mai said. “It’s different, but as Renako so wisely taught us, no two ways we feel for another person will ever be alike.”

“You’re making it sound cooler than it was,” I said.

Mai just chuckled. “Hence I wish to preserve this opportunity for us to be together. Whatever it takes, I’ll do. Whatever the price, I’ll pay. All right?”

Ajisai-san lowered her eyes to her lap. “‘Whatever the price’ could be an awful lot, Mai-chan. I don’t want you to push yourself too hard.”

“I will be fine. I know you have your own values, just as I have mine. You are an honorable, righteous soul who thinks much of doing the right thing. I would imagine you are not quite happy with Satsuki and me for pulling this ruse against my mother.”

Ajisai-san couldn’t refute it when it was said outright. She just nodded. One tiny little nod. “…Yeah. I’m not.”

A fact that Mai accepted. “Yet even so,” she said, taking it on the chin, “I must ask you to trust in me.” She touched a hand to her chest. “No longer will I ask you to wait for me as I go on ahead. I swear, from this point forth, that I want us to be together. A team.”

Her vow stirred an answering chord in my heart. Ajisai-san, too, joined me in staring at Mai in startled amazement.

“That is, I understand it’s a bit late to be saying this, but. Well. I wanted you both to know where I stand.” She smiled, a helpless little puff of a smile.

Ajisai-san relaxed into a grin too. “I’m glad to hear all of that,” she said. “Thank you, Mai-chan.”

Belatedly, I realized I should join in. “Yes!” I said, nodding rapidly. “Thank you for telling us how you feel. I appreciate it.”

“Oh, please,” Mai said. “You’ll make me blush with the way you two harp on.” She turned to her bag and hunted in it. “Before I forget, I brought something with me to prove just how serious I am about the two of you.”

“Ooh. What is it?” I said.

She placed a sheaf of papers on the table before Ajisai-san and me. Déjà vu prickled at the back of my mind. Where had I seen something like this before?

“This proposal,” she said, “outlines a plan for the rest of our life as per the agreed-upon quarterly girlfriend contract—viz, a contract to be renewed in three months’ time.”

“Mai-chan?!” Ajisai-san exclaimed.

“Hey!” I said. “No fair. That’s *my* quarterly contract!”

Mai just giggled. She was so pleased with herself. “Surprise,” she said. “How’d I do? Did I get you?”

I couldn’t believe this girl. What else did she have up her sleeve at this point? Freaking well-prepared, lovely, infuriating Oduka Mai.

“You got me all right,” said Ajisai-san. “I almost expected you to start calling me Party B.”

“You put in an awful lot of effort for a one-off joke,” I said, eyeing the stacks of paper. “I thought you had better things to do with your time.”

“As if your one-off joke wasn’t just as elaborate?” said Mai.

“Yeah, because it wasn’t a joke. I was serious!”

Mai giggled again. “Forgive me. I was just so charmed by your expression of affection that I couldn’t help but repay the favor.”

Ugggh! *Don’t make me blush, Mai!* Thing is, I *was* serious about that contract thing. I went and put in the appropriate legalese and everything. It was a complete waste of effort, of course—as it turned out, starting high school, reinventing my image, and gaining a love life did nothing to stymie production at my cringe moment factory.

But I had to cut myself a little slack. I might not have been perfect, but I put in the effort. That’s what paid off, I guess, and that’s what gave me my two wonderful girlfriends. Or…I don’t know. *I guess* was maybe too weak of a phrase. I wanted to believe effort could pay off. I needed to believe in the power of hard work to keep me going. I wanted to believe that every experience could be worth something in the long run. I really, really did.

Just then, Mai reached over and pressed a hand to my cheek,

startling me out of my thoughts. “Renako?” she said.

“Yeah?”

She leaned in, and—oh. Like it was the most natural thing in the world. Like it was right. She leaned in and kissed me…directly in front of Ajisai-san.

Ajisai-san squeaked, and my eyes snapped open. I pushed Mai away with all my might.

“Hey,” I said. “Hey, hey, hey!”

“What is the matter, Renako?” Mai said. She smiled at me with the self-satisfaction of a princess.

“What do you think you’re doing?!” I protested. Ugh. My face was on fire, I just knew it.

“Kissing you,” Mai said. “What else did it look like?”

“No! I mean…look! A-at her! We’re in *public*, Mai!”

At last a faint dust of pink began to appear on Mai’s cheeks too. “Oh, this hardly counts as public. Is this not a date among girlfriends?”

“Yes, but. But! But!!!”

I shot Ajisai-san a glance. She hid her face in her hands, but her eyes glittered through the cracks in her fingers. She was staring right at us.

“Oh my gosh,” she said. “Mai-chan and Rena-chan just kissed.”

“No! We totally didn’t.” What a blatant lie. What was I, a grade schooler?

“Did too,” she said.

Urgh. There was no disguising this one.

“Okay, yes. We did. But!”

Mai leaned in again with a chuckle. “Oh, look at you. You’re just adorable, Renako.”

“Stop! Seriously!”

I made an X with my fingers and hastily covered my mouth to prevent the second coming of the total public smooch.

“We don’t need to hide it. It’s just Ajisai,” Mai said. “What, would you rather we keep her in the dark about our relationship? That’s not very nice of you.”

“No, but that doesn’t mean we need to *show* her. Come on, Mai. You’re blushing too.”

“I suppose I am a bit bashful,” she relented. “But really, I promised to do whatever it took to secure our happiness. Is it so wrong to want to take things to the next step as a result?”

Wugh. The problem with arguing with Mai was that she looked so darn attractive doing it, it was hard to disagree with anything she said. And she had a point. But!

“Come now, Renako,” she said. “Humor me.”

“No! I refuse!” I was embarrassed, dammit!

It didn’t help that Ajisai-san was fanning herself and all but wheezing, trying to get her own racing heartbeat under control. “Oh my god,” she kept saying. “I’ve never seen people kissing—I mean, people I actually *know*.”

“Yeah, it’s…something, huh…” I said.

“Whew! Got me feeling all flustered,” she added. “But…” She balled her free hand into a fist. “I guess I’ll just have to get used to it. It’s bound to keep happening, after all.”

“What do you mean, it’s bound to keep happening?”

Two of us pairing off to canoodle when all three of us were together? Get real. That wasn’t how typical relationships worked!

But there I stopped myself, because I was the one who’d said to hell with typicality altogether. It was my choice to date both girls. Our relationship ran on no rules but the ones we three wrote for it.

In hindsight, ducking out of the room with an “Oops, gimme one sec. Gonna get smooched!” whenever Mai or Ajisai-san was in a kissing

mood was a hell of a lot more mortifying than just…doing it right then and there. Hell of a lot more deviant too. We'd come back, and there'd be like a sign over our heads—*look who just made out*—and then we'd all just have to sit there with that knowledge. And it'd be weird. Maybe kissing out in the open was the way to go. You know, like in a communication sense. Besides, husbands and wives kissed in front of their kids in American films and TV shows all the time, so maybe we could, I dunno, tap into those vibes? Make it so it wasn't so taboo feeling.

I looked up from my freak-out long enough to see that Mai had moved around the table to sit beside Ajisai-san. Hmm?

"Your turn," she said, looping her arms around Ajisai-san.

"M-Mai-chan," Ajisai-san said, her voice suddenly breathy.

Hey. Hey, hey, hey, hey.

Mai leaned in oh-so slow; Ajisai-san waited, eyes glistening in anticipation.

Hey!

I was leaping out of my chair before I knew what I was doing. "Hey!" I said.

They froze, Ajisai-san's eyes shut tight in readiness for the…the… Only Mai spared me a brief glance, a faint smile flickering across her face. She stopped. For me. Because I asked her to.

But then she turned away again, leaned in, and kissed—

Oh my god.

—the cheek. She kissed Ajisai-san on the cheek.

Her lips came away with the softest of noises, and she turned to me with a grin. “Yes? Is something wrong, Renako?” Mai said.

I was frozen, my arm outstretched, the pose of a person ready to snatch at a companion from tumbling off a cliff toward their doom. I plopped back into my seat, hard.

“No,” I said after a moment. And then, after another, “Nothing.”

She was messing with me. Straight up messing with me. Rude! This shameful display of rudeness was, well…rude! She couldn’t j-just…! She liked *me*! She had feelings for *me*! She was supposed to treat me better than anyone else on the planet. Those were the *rules*! She wasn’t allowed to mess with me. She…she…she!!!

God, and Ajisai-san was no better. She was red as a tomato. “A ch-cheek kiss…” she said to no one at all.

“Would you have preferred it on the mouth?” Mai asked (rudely! Operator, I’m calling to report a meany butthead!).

“N-no! No, I just, like… Oh jeez, like… Y’know…” The more agitated Ajisai-san got, the more she co-opted Kaho-chan’s speech style. “Like, just now, you were, um, talking about kissing, and I, um, oh gosh, I, like, started thinking about, like, maybe, kissing you, and then, um, you kinda, um, like, oh gosh.”

Hello? This was capital-N News to me.

Mai chuckled. “I put you in the mood, as it were.”

“N-n-no! I just…had kissing on the brain, and…! Oh gosh.”

“You’re adorable, Ajisai.”

“Oh *gosh*.”

Mai stroked Ajisai-san’s head, and I simply sat back, basked in the immaculate vibes, and enjoyed the show. They were a pair of princesses, and I was an NPC who happened to be in the same shot. Like, ey yo? You seeing what I’m seeing? Was it just me, or were things getting *steamy* in here? Were those two dating or something? (The answer was yes. Yes, they were.) Ajisai-san still hadn’t removed the hand from her cheek, so kiss-stunned was she. God. She and Mai made for such a pair.

“But I suppose, if we’ve learned one thing,” Mai said, interrupting

my drooling with an obvious shrug of the shoulders, “Renako may not be ready for this yet. Her acceptance is key, after all, so perhaps we’d best hold off for now.”

“Huh?” Caught in the spotlight, the NPC jumped. “No! I was just surprised, that’s all.”

“*I* was surprised,” Ajisai-san put in, a fellow victim of surprise Mai-on-the-other-girlfriend kisses. See? “But,” she continued, putting her hand to her chest and allowing herself a small smile, “not in a…not in a bad way.”

Oh… Okay. Ajisai-san watched Mai and me kiss, and that didn’t make her uncomfortable. Well, good! I didn’t want her uncomfortable. But I…

I’d never understood what jealousy was all about, or so I’d insisted up and down for ages. When Kaho-chan apologized to me for sitting in Ajisai-san’s lap, I was pretty sure I was just like “?” And when the news broke that Mai was engaged to Satsuki-san, my reaction had been basically, “Huh. Okay.” (The previous engagement announcement may have thrown me for a bit of a loop, but that’s neither here nor there.)

But now? Now… Man, I don’t know. Seeing Ajisai-san and Mai kiss in front of me made me feel kind of like, “Whoooooooa. Slow down.” Maybe it was just the suddenness. Or maybe not. Maybe I was finally feeling the emotion everyone else knew as jealousy. God, I didn’t know. Was this the mind-breaking feeling everyone talked about? Or was it not? Why did interpersonal relationships have to be so darn complicated? Wow, there were so many emotions yet waiting to be discovered! Yippee! (This was copium.)

“At any rate,” Mai began, lifting one hand and flashing a grin around the room.

Oh god, now what? I could only brace myself for whatever else she had in store.

“Last but not least, Renako and Ajisai. It’s your turn,” she said.

…

Huh?

Ajisai and I could barely look at one another, as awkward as a pair of strangers being introduced at a matchmaker’s. Our turn for what? Kissing?

Our answer was unanimous, as were our blushes, each of us turning fire-engine red. “No freaking way!”

Mai laughed outright. Kissing Ajisai-san in front of her? No! No freaking way! At the very least, not yet!

By the time we’d cleaned everything up and checked out, it was long past dark. We rode the train home as a group, and before each of us peeled off eventually to go our separate ways, the conversation flowed freely, like there was no end of things to talk about. Christmas being just around the corner. Winter break. Homework and school, the recent cultural festival, what we might do on our next date. In some ways, it felt like it’d been ages since we’d decided to be a throuple. In others, it felt like our relationship had only just begun. Even when the three of us were together, Mai and Ajisai-san treated me with the same easy, uncomplicated warmth that I associated with our one-on-one moments. It was nice. Comfortable. I could let my guard down and simply lean back into the moment.

Just moments after I got off my train, my phone buzzed. “Hmm?”

It was Mai. “Thank you for everything today,” she wrote. “I had a lovely time.”

Just two sentences, and yet I couldn’t help reading them over and over. *Aww, man.* I couldn’t stop the smile creeping up my face either, or the big sigh escaping from deep inside me.

You know what? I liked Mai. I really, really did. I liked the Mai who got up early just to throw us the perfect gyoza-making party, the Mai who cooked as good as she looked, the Mai who possessed determination and wasn’t afraid to show it. She was as good as they came. A girlfriend any guy or girl would dream of. Ashigaya’s own supadari. Little Miss Perfect.

And she was also the world’s biggest tease. Girl with a childish streak a kilometer wide. She’d clown on me and grin—grin with such genuine, innocent joy, that I’d know she was enjoying herself from the bottom of her heart, and it’d warm my heart too. I liked the real Mai that only Ajisai-san and I—her girlfriends—ever got to see.

My phone buzzed again. “I love you, Renako.”

My heart skipped a beat. Next thing I knew, I was curling up into

a ball on the ground.

What was happening to me? When I was tussling with Mai over whether to be best friends or girlfriends, I wouldn't have thought twice about her saying "I love you." "I love you" belonged to pop songs and cliches heard a thousand times over. But it didn't. Not now, it didn't. Now, it stabbed me in the heart like a weapon.

What had changed? Mai? Not her—or, on second thought, yes. She wasn't the same girl she'd been when I'd met her. But she wasn't to blame for this change. It was me. My understanding of her. I liked Mai. I *liked* liked Mai. I liked Mai romantically, and that made all the difference.

Today, in the few instances when the conversation struggled out of my grasp, Mai was there to steer it to safety. Mai was there to kiss me in front of Ajisai-san and take our relationship to the next level. Mai was there to bring us closer together than ever before.

Our throuple was born from my absurd, boundless greed, but I wasn't the only factor in this equation. Not by a long shot. Mai had made her mark on all of us, and if it wasn't for Mai, I don't think the three of us could ever have been a throuple for so long. And for that, I owed her the world. Or at least a thank you.

"No, thank YOU," I wrote. That part was easy. It was the next sentence that gave me pause: "I love you too."

No. God, no. I couldn't say that. Did I want to die from embarrassment? Please.

I stabbed that "Delete" button like my life depended on it and tried again.

This time, it came out as, "I like you too."

I could type this without utterly wiping out…potentially. Wugh. I was always restricting myself to just that one, tame word, "like." Mai was pouring out her heart to me, and I was pussyfooting around. That wasn't fair, right?

Fine. "I really like you too!" How was that? In terms of the volume of emotion, I was reciprocating—more or less. I even added an exclamation point. That made it passionate. Gave it oomph. It was practically the same thing as going, "Mai!!! I like you so, so, so much!"

Bluhhh. Now that this thought was in my head, I was doomed to

obsess about it for hours! Okay. I'd compromise and go with "I like you too!" There! I dropped the "really." Was this better? The perfect middle ground?

If only Mai were there to look my draft over and touch it up herself. I could hear her now: "Really, I think 'love' wouldbe your best option." *Yeah, well, tough titties, Mai.* This would be fine as-is! I was sending it! There!

God, I was panting from exhaustion. It was sent. It was done!

Just look at me, stressing over a single text message, worrying about what the recipient would think of my word choice. The me of just a few months ago would've been even worse, and it would've only cemented her conviction that being friends trumped dating by a landslide. But I don't know. There was something fun, something invigorating about this particular brand of emotional turmoil. Having Mai and Ajisai-san in my life was a blessing. More than I deserved, if I was going to be honest.

And I was going to be honest, which was why I sent Lucie-chan a mental apology. Despite it all, despite what it cost her—I didn't want to let Mai or Ajisai-san go.

I want to be with you two, whatever the cost. I pledge to do whatever it takes, whatever is in my power. Mai's words, but they could've been mine. Because I felt the same way too. Whatever it took, whatever was or wasn't within my power…I didn't want to give up on this newfound happiness. Now that I'd tasted it, it was impossible to let it go. Mai telling me she had a crush on me, Ajisai-san saying the same thing… Kissing Mai. Kissing Ajisai-san. That was happiness. These two girls and their feelings for me were happiness.

How selfish I'd become. How willing to dream big.

Happiness was all around me that way home, palpable and yet airy light, little specks of happiness drifting down around me like Tinkerbell's fairy dust. Mai and Ajisai-san's feelings for me cloaking me like an omnipresent shield.

If only the similes were truth.

The weather took a sudden turn for the worse before I was all the way to my door. I didn't have an umbrella on me, so I broke out into a

run. Not watching where I was going, I stepped down into the gutter, tripped, and felt my ankle give a sickening wrench. Yowch!

It wasn't swelling up, but still, what a stroke of rotten luck. I must've used it all up going on a date with Mai and Ajisai-san. (That's a joke, of course. If luck were really a currency, them agreeing to go out with me would've summoned a bolt of lightning from the heavens, killing me instantly.) I just had to stay positive! Why, even the ominous flock of crows on the power line overhead were just a part of my cheer squad! Caw, caw, bestie!

Okay, no. I legitimately had a bad feeling about this. I couldn't help but recall the fortune that read: *Life: Yikes! There's a good chance your life is in real danger. Now's the time to invest in a bunker.*

I'd looked it up, and underground bunkers went for something in the ballpark of fifteen million yen—which, as you might imagine, was a *little* out of my budget. Besides, I didn't need a bunker when my emotional safe space was just a few minutes' walk away. (I'm talking about my bed, which was, like. A bunker in my heart.) If I could just get there, I'd be fine.

But as I limped closer, I noticed a limousine parked outside of my house. Huh? Limousines were not a frequent occurrence in this neighborhood, which made me suspect this was the car that drove Mai around. What, had she forgotten something?

I stopped just shy of the car, and the back door opened. Out stepped—

"Huh?" I said. "Satsuki-san?"

There was no mistaking someone that drop-dead gorgeous, but what was she doing here? Visiting me, presumably, but for what? Hadn't we already talked through the Lucie-chan situation?

Her curtain of black hair swayed in the breeze behind her as she spoke to someone still in the car, paying me no attention. "You're up."

"Huh?" I said again. "Wait, Satsuki-san—"

She strode past me, unhearing. Hello? If she wasn't here to see me, then why was she at my house? Was there something I was missing, or…?

My brain a mess of question marks, I watched her stalk away until a voice from the car startled me out of my thoughts. "Amaori-sama," it

said.

Behind the wheel was none other than Mai's servant—one very unmistakable Hanatori-san. She didn't even pretend to give me a friendly smile. Her omnipresent death stare drilled me down.

"Please, Amaori-sama," she repeated. "Get in the car."

We drove in silence for an interminably long time. At length, I dared to speak up from the back seat. "Uh… Can I ask where we're going?"

Nothing. Hanatori-san hadn't said a word to me since I got in.

"What were you and Satsuki-san doing in front of my house?" I tried. "Were you waiting for me?"

Still nothing.

I stared out the window. I could feel us getting farther and farther from civilization. Was this it? Was I being murdered? Was she really going to take me to an abandoned building in the mountains, strand me there, and leave me to the mercy of a killer clown? *What had I done to deserve this, Hanatori-san?! I thought we were friends!* We'd even seen each other naked! *Did that mean nothing, Hanatori-san? How could you do this to me?*

I trembled like an aspen leaf. "Um, Hanatori-san? I kinda need to go pee…"

Not even that warranted a response! And you'd think it would! Surely she didn't want me to go *numero uno* in the limo! Was ignoring me a tacit okay? Unless she suspected I didn't actually need to pee and just wanted an excuse to bolt for it. She was right, but still!

My fear shot through the roof. The creeping, spine-tingling chill of Japanese horror had nothing on me. This was pure Western horror genre fare, the feeling of certain death breathing down my neck.

We drove close to another ten minutes before Hanatori-san stopped abruptly. "We are here," she said.

"Eeep!"

I dared to peek out the window. I hoped to see a parking lot I knew quite well, allowing me to relax and realize I'd only been taken to Mai's apartment. Alas, that was exactly what did not happen. We were, I realized, quite literally in the middle of nowhere in the mountains. Oh

no, no, no, no. Next thing you knew, there'd be clowns.

"Please exit the car," Hanatori-san said.

"No thank you!"

At my reluctance, Hanatori-san got out of the driver's seat, so I had no choice but to leave the car too. Urgh. My legs trembled with fear as I followed her a few steps down the gravel shoulder of the road.

Where *were* we? The middle of the boonies, apparently, with nothing but a bumpy gravel road extending in either direction. There was not a person or landmark to be seen. We were in true no-man's land, a place where it might be hours before another car came along. Clouds blanketed the sky, threatening to drop rain on our heads at any second.

"Um," I said. "Hanatori-san? Why did you take me here? It's, uh, not April Fool's Day yet. Right?"

I added my best attempt at nervous laughter, hoping against hope to get on her good side. Then, inspiration struck. I rubbed my hands together and smiled in Hanatori-san's direction.

"Oh! Did you hear the news? Mai and Satsuki-san are engaged to be married! That's, uh, a big win for the Mai × Satsu fans, huh? Congrats on your ship going canon! Must be a dream come true."

Hanatori-san's shoulders twitched. Aha! I was getting through to her.

"Aren't they just made for each other? I couldn't think of a better pairing! Childhood friends growing up and getting married—isn't that the most romantic thing? The dream for girls the world over! A Hollywood blockbuster in the making!"

Hanatori-san still didn't turn and look at me, but she at last said in her usual detached tone, "I suppose that means you and my mistress have broken up."

Well, about that…

I couldn't look at her. What was I supposed to do? Lie in a desperate bid to save my life? Or tell her the truth and go down with courage? I didn't have to think twice. I knew what my answer would be.

"We sure did!" I said. I was getting out of here alive, damn it! "I mean, it was bound to happen eventually," I went on, throwing pride to

the wind. “I’m nothing special, so me dating Mai was a total laugh. A flash in the pan, you know? I’m grateful she let me! That’s about it.”

“My mistress,” Hanatori-san cut in, her tone brooking no argument, “is not one to date with half-hearted conviction.”

Ruh-roh.

“T-true,” I stammered. “Well, then I don’t know why she dated me and dumped me. Must have had a reason. Who knows why? Not me! Could be she just fell out of love. It happens! I dunno! I’m just a cookie-cutter model of every girl ever, after all!”

“Please stop.”

Now, finally, Hanatori-san turned to me, and the look in her eyes was terrifying. They were empty. Dead. Hollow caverns set in her face.

“Y-yes?” I said.

“I know everything,” she said. “You do not need to lie.”

“You mean, *everything* everything?”

Hanatori-san nodded. “You ought to know that, when Renée-sama announced the engagement to Lefebvre-sama, I spoke up in protest for the first time in my life.”

“Huh?”

Hanatori-san’s words pattered the ground between us like raindrops. “My mistress’s life is hers and hers alone. No matter how much anyone cares for her, that does not give them the right to decide her life for her. I said that very thing to Renée-sama. I knew my mistress was dating a friend from school. I couldn’t stay silent.”

“You…” I took my time, finding the right words. “You spoke up for Mai and me?”

Hanatori-san, trying to save our relationship? The same Hanatori-san who called me a venomous pest? The Hanatori-san who treated me like the dirt under Mai’s feet?

Hanatori-san didn’t answer me. She just said, “Renée-sama did not listen, and I’ve been heartbroken since. I could not protect my mistress. I failed, and the failure distracted me from my work for days after. Until…” Hanatori-san shook her head. “Until my mistress spoke to Renée-sama and expressed her desire to marry Koto-sama instead. My heart soared. Indeed, I suffered a minor heart attack. But I soon came to

my senses and realized that something was wrong. For, as I said, my mistress is not one to date with half-hearted convictions."

Wait, what was that about a heart attack? That felt like a newsworthy event I should've been aware of…

"Day by day, I became more convinced than ever that something was wrong. This was not what my mistress truly wanted, I knew, and it was my duty to stop it—weep bloody tears though I might. But I was prevented from doing such when my mistress and Koto-sama came to me and told me their engagement was all a plan to thwart Renée-sama's machinations. A conspiracy, a collusion, to protect my mistress's freedom in life."

My heart pounded in my chest. So Hanatori-san knew everything. *Everything* everything.

"I was saddened to hear this news, yes, but I was also…content, I suppose. Much as she'd done once when she was but a child, my mistress had taken her life into her own hands and defied her mother's orders. I've been lucky enough to see, I think, true love."

A memory made a smile break across her lips. "Once then, and once now. True love shared does not need marriage to give it shape. Marriage is a formality, but true love is a tie that binds for all eternity. If my mistress and Koto-sama trusted me enough to tell me the truth, it is only right that I give them all my support—if I couldn't before, then now."

Oh. I saw how it was. Hanatori-san wasn't working with Mai's mother. She was on Mai's side. Which meant, by extension, my side.

All the tension drained out of me. Thank god. There'd been no need for this sense of impending doom after all. Why Hanatori-san thought it necessary to drag me out to the middle of nowhere for this talk, I still didn't know, but I also didn't care. I was too relieved.

"Thank you, Hanatori-san," I said.

"As a result," she said, "here."

She tossed a sheaf of papers she'd had clasped under her arm this whole time. It landed in the gravel at my feet with barely a thump.

What the? I stooped to pick it up, and as I did, the title caught my eye: Investigation Results Courtesy of the Picaris Detective Agency. There was a name in the lower right corner, and it was Terusawa

Youko. Youko-chan? The heck?

"What is this?" I asked, looking up at Hanatori-san. With her head lowered like that, her bangs effectively covered her eyes, preventing me from seeing the look on her face. Did she want me to read this?

Gingerly, I lifted the papers, brushed the dirt off the bottom sheet, and began to flip through the files. There, clear as day, was a photograph of *me*. Hello?

"What *is* this?" I repeated.

"We hired a private investigator to look into you," Hanatori-san said. "Anyone would, should they wish to keep my mistress safe and happy."

I, the world's most ordinary teenager, would never have come up with that even if I had a million guesses. "But what's Youko-chan's name doing on this?" I said. "Wait. What? Huh?"

I flipped faster. Mai. Satsuki-san. Ajisai-san and Kaho-chan. They were all here, staring back at me in photo after photo of the Quintet. Then, on the last page, the most ridiculous sentence jumped out at me: *In conclusion, Amaori Renako is four-timing Oduka Mai.*

"What the heck?!" I said.

At that very moment, thunder rumbled off in the distance. Hanatori-san's voice shook. "It pains me to think my mistress and Koto-sama…have tried so hard to protect a girl capable of this…this… monstrosity, but…"

The ground rumbled beneath my feet. A fell aura swirled around Hanatori-san, shaking the very pebbles in the gravel. A line of sweat trickled down my back. Hanatori-san wasn't about to leave me for the clowns. She was going to kill me herself. I had to act very, very fast.

"No!" I said. "This is all lies! I swear, it's not true!"

"Oh?" Hanatori-san looked up. "Is it now?"

Her clenched fist was a chainsaw in my eyes. My mind raced. Penal code 199—

"No!" I insisted. I thrust my hands out in front of me, my voice cracking with the volume of my scream. "I'm not four-timing Mai! I swear!"

"Explain. The truth, now." It was like she didn't even hear me. She

trained her lightless eyes on me, pinning me in place. “The moment you lie to me, I will know it. And I will…do something to you.”

“Something?! What’s that supposed to mean?”

“If you do not know, let me demonstrate.”

“The verdict is still out! You can’t skip to the execution!”

Hanatori-san advanced on me, step by slow step. “You are four-timing my mistress, are you not?” she demanded of me.

“No! I swear to god, I’m not!”

“You are four-timing my mistress, are you not?”

“Not on my life! I promise!”

“You are four-timing my mistress, are you not?”

“What is this? One of those RPG cutscenes where you’re stuck until you say yes?”

My back hit the side of the limo. There was nowhere else to go, and Hanatori-san just kept coming. This was it. I was utterly screwed. She was, and I meant it, going to kill me. There was nothing for it. I had to come clean. “I’m not four-timing!” I said. “I’m just dating Ajisai-san and Mai. We’re…we’re a throuple!”

And Hanatori-san, she…she looked dumbfounded for all of a second. “What?” she said.

Literally crying from fear at this point, I said, “Remember those rumors of me dating two girls at once that stemmed from that cosplay competition? Those were true. Not just baseless gossip. I wanted to make Mai *and* Ajisai-san happy, so I took them by the hand and said we should all date each other!”

For a moment, the only sound was my echo bouncing off the side of the mountain. Once again, thunder rolled.

Hanatori-san was aghast. “You were…*two*-timing her?”

“I mean…! Sure, if you want to call it that.”

It sucked to have my big, life-changing decision branded as two-timing, but now wasn’t the time to split hairs—not if I wanted to live.

I nodded, inhaled, and pressed on. “So please, Hanatori-san! Please believe me. This report is all wrong. I’m not four-timing—I would never! I’m nowhere near despicable enough to cheat on Mai. It’s

all lies, I swear. Please believe me. The most I'm guilty of is dating two girls at once."

"Is that not that same thing?!"

And that's the story of how Renako Amaori's body was abandoned in the mountains.

What had I done to deserve *any* of this?

Chapter 4:
Is There Really No Freaking Way It'll Ever Work?

OKAY, I KNOW I SAID my body was abandoned in the mountains, but what that really meant was that Hanatori-san drove off and left me a fifteen-minute walk from the nearest train station. I got home more or less in one piece. (Despite all the thunder, it never ended up raining.)

I escaped with my life, but the whole way home, the final insults Hanatori-san had lobbed at me kept running through my head. *"Venomous pest,"* for one. *"What possessed my mistress to ever choose someone so…so…?!* for another. *And Koto-sama, no less. It baffles the mind. It is absurd, preposterous, an utterly repulsive travesty. Out of all eight billion people on Earth, my mistress chooses you, and you have the gall to so much as* look *at another woman? What is wrong with you? Never, and I mean ever, go near my mistress again. I was a fool to even think of trusting you. Venomous pest! So much as breathe in my mistress's direction, and I will end you. I don't care if she hates me for it. I don't care if I'm locked behind bars for life. I swear, I'll—"*

Oh, and how could I forget the final *"Venomous pest!"*?

The diatribe would haunt me for life. *Hey, God, if you're out there, could you tell me if dating Ajisai-san and Mai at the same time is* that *horrible?* And why was I the only one to pay the Hanatori-san price for it? Well, because it was my stupid decision, that was why. Ughhh. God.

She got me good. I felt terrible.

***

"—chan," I heard through a dreamy haze. "Rena-chan."

I came to with a snap to find a beautiful, kindhearted goddess before me. "God, is that you?" I said.

"Huh? No…?"

The hint of a smile clued me in. Right, not God. An angel. Or no—just Ajisai-san.

“Class is over,” she said. “It’s break now.”

Which made sense, in hindsight, because everyone was talking. I must have dozed off in the middle of the lecture.

“Sorry,” I said. “I think I fell asleep for a sec there.”

Lord knows I’d barely slept last night. I couldn’t shake my encounter with Hanatori-san.

“I saw,” Ajisai-san said. “Or we all saw, actually. You sounded like you were having a nightmare, and even the teacher was concerned for you.”

Man, Ajisai-san was so cute when she frowned. I adored her bouncy waves of hair, her gentle voice… People the world over wished they had a girlfriend half as a good as mine. How could I ask for anything more? Yet I did. I know, I know. I was a greedy, spoiled brat. I thought I’d been aware of that from day one, but I guess I’d been deluding myself.

“Sorry,” I said, scooting back my chair.

“Hmm?”

“I’m going to go up to the roof for a bit.”

Ajisai-san looked at me, worried. “But next period’s just about to start.”

Sorry, Ajisai-san, I thought again. I turned and left, shrugging off her concern for me. Satsuki-san and Mai’s eyes followed me out, but I didn’t let that stop me either.

“Bluh,” I said.

The wind blew hard, chilly in the December weather. Right now, when I felt like an utter sack of crap, the cold was more than welcome. I wanted the discomfort. I wanted *more* hurt. I wanted someone to come along and punish me—y’know, not to the point of killing me. But close. Then maybe, maybe everyone could forgive me for the double sins of coveting another girl on top of Mai. On top of Ajisai-san too. For the sin of not wanting to hurt anyone. For daring to dream of a happiness I didn’t deserve.

“Fat chance of that,” I said.

My heart was broken. Hacked in half by an imaginary chainsaw.

Remember that girl I'd been back when I first started dating Mai and Ajisai-san? Remember how she brimmed with hope? Mai and Ajisai-san had other loved ones, other people who wanted their happiness. To those folks, I was just an uncertain variable destabilizing the equation. But I'd traded conventionality for a chance at further happiness. I was resolved enough—determined enough—to try and try and try as hard as I could to win their support. And I did. I tried, and I tried, and I tried.

But what was the point? What was the point in trying for an impossible dream? The moment I chose to be atypical, I gave up all chance of winning support. Because I wasn't typical. And there was no support for the atypical. I was up against all of society. And that was the problem—none of us, not me or Mai or Ajisai-san, could live in a little world of three. If the whole world was against us, we couldn't be happy so long as we had each other. We lived in and ran with diverse circles of people, circles I stood no chance of winning acceptance from. Because I wasn't enough. I just wasn't. And I never should've dared to dream otherwise.

"It's just not possible," I said. I rested my forehead against the handrailing.

What now? That was the million-dollar question, wasn't it? I couldn't shrug it off and go on dating Mai like nothing had ever happened—I didn't have a death wish. But at the same time, I didn't want to tattle on Hanatori-san. Nothing she said was *wrong*. She had Mai's best wishes at heart, and she only threatened me because she thought it was the right thing to do.

And what if I told Mai, and she turned on Hanatori-san in a fit of anger? What if she fired her? Well, maybe things would be okay for a while. But it was only a matter of time before another person came along who cared for Mai, and the whole song and dance would play out over again. And then what? Fire that person too? On and on, an endless stream of Mai cutting out all the people in her life who didn't like our decision? What if her family were the next to get mad at us? Or Ajisai-san's family? If all our loved ones turned on us, would I really swear to keep trying? Was that what I *really*, really felt?

No. God, no. I told myself that I'd do whatever it took, pay whatever price, but that was a big, fat lie. An uninformed lie. I wasn't ready to pay the price when the price was causing someone

unhappiness.

The whole school was quiet now with everyone in class.

If only Mai, Ajisai-san, and I were the only three people in the world. Think of how pleasant that'd be. But…think how sad that'd make Mai and Ajisai-san. They had people they cared about. Family, friends. All sorts of people who loved them. Guess who was just thinking about her dumb, selfish self again? Oh yeah. Me.

The creak of the door opening behind me distracted me from the worst of these unpleasant thoughts. I'd left the door unlocked because I intended to go back down eventually, so it was technically possible for someone to come and join me, but I couldn't think who would. I turned, hating to muster even that small scrap of effort.

"Whatcha doing up here?" said my visitor, tossing me a friendly wave in greeting. "Shouldn'tcha be in class?"

My eyes fell heavily upon her. "What're *you* doing here?"

"That's not very friendly, Renako-kun."

It was Terusawa Youko-chan, grinning away like nothing had ever happened.

"To be real with you," she said, joining me at the rail, "I'm kinda glad I caught you outside of class. Good time for a private talk, huh? I spotted you in the hallway earlier and followed you. Thanks for doing me a solid the other day, by the way."

"What other day?" I said.

"Y'know. When you babysat the princess. Whatever you did cheered her up, seems like."

"Oh. Yeah."

Going to Queen Rose to bomb it and the rest of that hot mess the other day, then. It felt like ages ago now, what with everything else going on.

Hesitantly, I said, "Hey, Youko-chan? What's Picaris?"

She answered as nonchalantly as if we were just comparing answers after some easy test. "Oh, that? It's the detective agency I work for."

"You work for a detective agency?"

"I *am* a detective."

Hearing the admission out of her own mouth was almost as shocking as the original reveal. Shocking, and as depressing as gravity. It took me a minute to say, "I thought we were friends. Did you… Did you really only hang out with me so you could watch me?"

In hindsight, it all made sense. Youko-chan even knew about Nashiji Komachi. She said as much to my face. This whole time, she'd been a bald-faced liar. And god that hurt. It really, really did. But no matter how bad it made me feel, I knew none of it would have ever happened if I hadn't tried to date Mai and Ajisai-san at the same time. I was reaping what I sowed—and what I'd sewed was my own funeral shroud.

"At the start, yeah," she said. She *nodded*. Like she didn't even feel guilty about it. "I technically shouldn't breach my client's confidentiality by telling this to the target of one of my investigations, but screw it. I'm done being a detective."

"Huh?" I said. "What do you mean, done?"

"Finished. Done-zo. Princess Rose and her fiancée are going to hold their engagement ceremony this month, and that means my job is complete. They paid me; I cleared off the last of my folks' debt. I am officially a free woman."

"Wait. They're having an engagement ceremony?"

I'd heard of those before—basically, ceremonies to formalize the promise to marry later. If Satsuki-san and Mai were having one, that sounded like they were legitimately gearing up to marry. So long to me, I guess.

I turned my attention away from that. "And what was that about your family being in debt?"

"See, some folks have all the luck. And I hate them for it," she said. Her voice was slightly lower than its usual register, resembling Youko-chan-the-Lucie-chan-maid more than Youko-chan-the-classmate. Must've been her true voice, then. "I started investigating you for Queen Rose, right? And the more I dug, the more you pissed me off. First Oduka Mai, then Sena Ajisai? And Koto Satsuki on top of that? Then Koyanagi Kaho's just icing on the cake. You really have four girls eating out of the palm of your hand. Imagine falling for someone willing to string them all along. I could never."

I really wasn't stringing them all along, but that was neither here nor there. It didn't make much of a difference if I was dating two people or four people simultaneously.

In my silence, Youko-chan added, "Until…" She rested her arms on the railing, and her voice rose, becoming breezy. "Once I got to know you, I realized maybe you weren't so bad after all."

I didn't respond, nor did I think much of it. She was just saying that to make me feel better. Fat chance everyone would be willing to overlook my transgressions if they only took the time to learn who I really was, and besides, I couldn't assume Youko-chan even meant it.

"You even go along with Lucie-chan," she said. "You put up a stink face, but you *do* go along with her. At first, I thought maybe you're just one of those girls who can't say no to anyone."

"Excuse me?"

"It's just your vibe. You come off as a total doormat."

The back of my neck burned as a certain shower scene flashed through my mind.

"Hey!" I said. "There's being a doormat, and then there's *you* going too far."

She grinned at having finally gotten a rise out of me. "See what I mean? After all that, you still considered me a friend. You're pretty forgiving, Renako-kun."

I scowled at her. "You're telling me you did that on purpose?"

"Sure," she said. "You know what you are? You're a lady lady-killer. A skirt chaser in a skirt."

"I am so not."

That implied I had special, specific feelings for girls only, which was so not true. I'd only said that, like, one bajillion times, but with my current track record, no one was ever going to believe me.

Youko-chan laughed. "My point is, if it's a question of whether I like or dislike you, I'm leaning toward the like camp now."

"Great," I said. "Just fabulous."

"What, you don't believe me?"

I don't know, man… I couldn't quite meet her eye. "You've literally

been lying to me this entire time, so…"

"Okay then." She touched my shoulder. Hmm?

I turned, and she caught my face in her hands. Her eyes glittered with warmth. "Will a kiss change your mind?"

"Hello?"

I flushed, and Youko-chan laughed again. God dammit! She was messing with me!

"Maybe *you're* the skirt chaser in a skirt," I snapped.

"Har-dee-har. Very funny," she said.

"I'm serious. Stop it! I don't need to be, what, five-timing?"

"Four-timing's a crime, but two-hundred-timing's Don Giovanni."

"Which is not exactly the goal here."

She just laughed again. Then, almost as an afterthought, she said, "Koto Satsuki."

"Huh?"

Youko-chan met my eye. "Look, since I'm here, I might as well put all the cards on the table. Koto Satsuki's been pulling the strings since day one."

I didn't have the faintest idea what that meant. "What would Satsuki-san stand to gain by…pulling strings…?"

"When word got out that Princess Rose's girlfriend was cheating on her, Queenie Rose herself called up me 'n Koto Satsuki. That's when we hatched the plan to break you two up."

"Huh?" Say that again?

"She's up to something," Youko-chan said. "Not a good something either."

I almost didn't want to ask. "What?"

Youko-chan shrugged. "Good question."

"Dude."

"No, I'm serious. I have no idea what she's thinking. She's more inscrutable to me than you are, big time."

I frowned hard. Queenie Rose had to be Mai's mom, which meant that she thought I'd been four-timing Mai for, what, months now? And

then Youko-chan and Satsuki-san were in cahoots to…break us up…?

“But that doesn’t mean Mai is…?” I began.

“Now you’re getting it,” said Youko-chan. “Getting led along by the nose? You betcha.”

But that was…ridiculous! Who could do that to their friend?

“But Satsuki-san is my very best friend in the whole wide world,” I found myself saying. “She says it herself! We love each other and accept each other’s faults. She can’t… She can’t… She can’t be tricking Mai and me!”

“You sure about that?”

“…… Yes.”

If it was a question of whether she’d screw over a friend, the answer was a resounding yes. Sorry. Wait, why was I apologizing? Satsuki-san was the one doing bad things, not me! And for crying out loud, just look at her track record. Screwing over friends was Satsuki-san’s M.O. Good thing Lucie-chan hadn’t gone to her instead of me, because if she had, Queen Rose wouldn’t be standing today!

Which, on the flip side, was one of Satsuki-san’s best qualities. Or was it? Who in their right mind celebrated the ability to bomb the company of one’s longest-standing friend? Maybe internet powerscalers, but not me! God, I was so mixed up now.

“Hold on. I need to get this all straight,” I said, hand to the temple and palm facing out toward Youko-chan. “You’re a detective.”

“Yup.”

“You were lying to me the whole time. Which, uh, the audacity? I’m heartbroken.”

“Sowwy.”

“I’m wounded. I really am. All your kindness was a lie, and now I’m never going to trust anyone again. I thought we were friends! But no. Now, I’m doomed to be skeptical of everyone I meet, because you never know if they’re just another detective trying to get the lowdown on me. It’s all your fault, Youko-chan. Take responsibil—”

“I *get* it, girl. Move on.”

Cut off mid-sentence! The cheek!

“Anyway, it’s because of this that Mai’s mom has the stupid idea I’m dating four girls at once.”

“What do you mean, stupid idea? Aren’t you?”

I looked at Youko-chan. She looked at me.

God, I was torn. Should I tell her truth? Something told me “Yeah, Youko-chan! It’s all your fault people think I’m juggling four girlfriends in one go. It’s only two!” wouldn’t go over as well as I hoped. Alas.

Instead, I opted to ignore it and keep going. “Mai’s mom wanted to break things off between me and Mai, and so she gave you and Satsuki-san the order to do just that.”

“Yupperino.”

“That’s why you became friends with me and tried to come on to me in the bath. The neck biting was part of it too. You weren’t just messing around; you were trying to, what’s the word… Honeypot me. To get proof that I was cheating on Mai. Man, I’m really going to have trust issues from this. Responsibility, Youko-chan, respons—”

“Lay off me, okay? It was for work.” Youko-chan turned red for reasons that were beyond me to say. Probably embarrassed by her own behavior.

I could’ve gone on about Youko-chan’s many misdeeds for a couple more hours, but I recognized the futility of the exercise and turned my attention back to Satsuki-san. “And on top of that, Satsuki-san is working on her own to break up Mai and me. You don’t know what, exactly, this entails. Do I have that all right?”

“Yup, yup, and yup.”

Assuming everything Youko-chan said was true, that was. Why I would trust a girl who lied about her identity and freaking *spied on* me for weeks was beyond me. See? The trust issues were already here. *Responsibility, Youko-chan! Responsibility!*

That aside, now that I looked back on it, I recalled numerous instances of Satsuki-san and Youko-chan going at each other’s throats, suggesting they had had some kind of weird connection. Maybe Youko-chan wasn’t feeding me a complete pack of lies. And if she wasn’t, then all of this had been Satsuki-san’s idea. Her becoming Mai’s fiancée and —although this one was only a guess—setting Hanatori-san on me too. It had to be. Why else would Satsuki-san have been in the limo? She

was waiting for me to show up; there was no other explanation. I would've bet real money that she was also the one who gave Hanatori-san the report that claimed I was four-timing Mai. (Had Hanatori-san received that report any sooner, she would've shown up at my house and killed me there.)

"I don't get it," I said. "What's Satsuki-san's deal?"

"The money, maybe?" Youko-chan offered. "But honestly, that's not what it looked like to me."

And Satsuki-san would've known, obviously, that I wasn't really dating four girls at once. Hell, she was one of the girls in question! She could've cleared up the misunderstanding at any time, and the fact that she didn't suggested it suited her purposes in some way. So what *were* those purposes? Satsuki-san was a mystery I couldn't begin to unravel, but I'd spent enough time with her that I figured I might have a hint or two lying around in the recesses of my brain.

I started digging. There was that weird text she sent me when I started dating Mai and Ajisai-san. The "go out with me too, Amaori" text. When I kept bugging her about what she meant by that, she eventually came to my house and said, "My answer is that I do not want to tell you why I sent you that message. And that is all I will say on the matter." Which, okay. Kinda weird. But Satsuki-san was kinda weird in general, so I never thought much of it.

But now, I dunno. She'd been borrowing Kaho-chan's dating sims and, according to her mom, reading oodles of romance novels. And *that* wasn't like the Satsuki-san I knew and loved. Taking all that into account—and using a heaping dose of common sense—resulted in a single conclusion.

"You think Satsuki-san wants to have a dating life of her own?" I said.

Youko-chan put a hand to her chin. "I don't think she's that straightforward."

"You're telling me."

If Satsuki-san wanted to date, all she had to do was ask, and she'd have had admirers lining up around the block. She was kinda prickly, but she was also stunningly smart, freaking gorgeous, sweet in her own Satsuki-san way, and incredibly caring. I'd dated her for two weeks and been convinced she'd make an excellent wife.

Why she'd be hung up on me, then, was a mystery. "So, what's she really after?" I asked.

Maybe she had a crush on Mai and wanted to marry her for real. Or maybe marrying Mai was all part of some larger plot. Hmm… I had the beginnings of an idea, but what was it? Come on; it was so close. I could just about put my finger on it—

But right then, the door slammed open and someone yelled, "Just *ask* her already, for crying out loud!"

Youko-chan and I whirled around. Neither of us expected to see the girl standing there with her arms crossed and fluff of wavy hair blowing in the wind.

"A-Ajisai-san?" I spluttered.

"Look who it is," Youko-chan said.

"Yes! Me, Sena Ajisai!" She stomped up to us, way more animatedly than she typically was. "And I'm telling you, all you need to do is ask her! What else do you have to lose? The cat's out of the bag already."

"Sena-san, were you always like this?" Youko-chan asked.

"No, but who cares? I've known something's up with Satsuki-chan for *ages* now, and no one's done anything about it!" She radiated a toddler-like fury, her fists clenched.

"You have?" I said.

"Yes!" She nodded—a full five times. That's how amped up she was.

"Aren't you supposed to be in class?" I said.

"Aren't *you*?"

Okay, fair point. Put away the accusatory pointer finger, Ajisai-san.

"Sorry. I guess you wouldn't be ditching if not for me, huh?"

"Oh, no! Don't worry about that. Sorry, Rena-chan. I didn't mean to make you worry about me." She giggled bashfully, suddenly reverting to the soft creature I knew and loved. The nerve of me, to make such an angel concerned about me. The sheer selfishness.

Just then, she remembered she was on the warpath and shook her head—six times, I counted. "Anyway, my point is, you need to pin

Satsuki-chan down and *ask* her."

"Y-yes, ma'am."

Ajisai-san was ready to march out of there and do it herself, but I couldn't quite match her energy. I mean, what about Mai? Shouldn't she hear about this first? If Ajisai-san and I went to her together, she was sure to take us seriously—that is, until she discovered that the source of our intel was a detective hired by her mother. Then she'd likely side with Satsuki-san. None of us had any idea how deep the rabbit hole went or what Satsuki-san might have done to persuade Mai into swapping fiancées. In the end, cornering her and forcing her to come clean was probably the best idea. Could be she'd reveal that the whole thing was a lie—even the Hanatori-san issue, and I *knew* Satsuki-san had given Hanatori-san that report—and we could put this mess behind us. Nice and simple! Wouldn't solve the underlying issues, but hey! A solution was a solution!

But then I pictured Satsuki-san looming large and ominous over the nearby mountain. Urgh. The biggest issue of all was whether Satsuki-san would even be honest with us. Satsuki-san was strong. Like, iron wall strong. The kind of character who didn't randomly lose all their cool boss powers when they joined the player's party. She'd gotten ganged up on by three girls from Class B just before the interclass basketball game, and she'd sent them all crying.

One of me against all of her? No thank you. But I wasn't alone. I had Ajisai-san! My Electric-type moves against her Gyarados! My archers against her flying units! My Luffy against her Enel! My Ajisai-san against her Satsuki-san! Satsuki-san's ultimate weakness! There was a light at the end of the tunnel. There was hope after all!

"Okay!" I said, with a firm nod. "Will do. With you here, there's a good chance we can get to the bottom of this business."

"I'll do my best!"

"We sic you on her, and she'll start sobbing and apologizing. She'll turn herself in! You got this, Ajisai-san!"

"Um, I'll try…?"

If it turned out their stories didn't align and Youko-chan was just lying to me again—well, that was at least a step in the right direction. With a little luck, Hanatori-san wouldn't Penal Code 199 me!

“Let’s go, Ajisai-san! On to Koto Satsuki, the source of the scourge and director of the darkness! Your name will go down in legend! Everyone will know the tale of Sena Ajisai!”

“With pleasure, Rena-chan! She won’t know what hit her!”

She threw out her chest, ready to rumble—and, for once, not bringing me down to Earth when I acted like a space case. God, she was the best. What would I have done without her? An angel among angels, Ajisai-san could’ve given the archangel Gabriel a run for his money.

“Uh, hello?” That was Youko-chan, the bystander in all our weirdness. “Sena-san, how much did you overhear, anyway?”

Oh. Good question. We *might* have said some things I didn’t want Ajisai-san to know.

“Well,” said Ajisai-san, not even bothering to lie, “I heard Satsuki-chan wants to break up Mai-chan and Rena-chan—which is somehow different than you trying to break up Mai-chan and Rena-chan—and you don’t know what her end goal is.”

“Oh, was that all?” I said. Whew!

Youko-chan was just as relieved. “Good. Good! So, you didn’t hear me trying to kiss Renako-kun.”

“Trying to do what now?!” Ajisai-san squeaked.

“Youko-chan?!” I cried, rounding on her.

She burst out laughing. The cruelty! The…the ignominy! As if my trust issues weren’t bad enough already!

“Nah, I’m just kidding,” she said. “Believe me, I have zero interest in being a part of all y’all’s mess. Not my circus, not my monkeys. I’ve got my own life to live, and from now on, I’m going to stay firmly in my own lane.”

Ajisai-san was still shuddering in horror. I had to convince her it was all a joke, and fast.

“It’s not what it sounds like,” I said. “Youko-chan was just saying that as part of her ploy to break up Mai and me. She was coming on to me because she’s one of Mai’s mom’s hired goons.”

Ajisai-san put a hand to her mouth and eyed me with concern, so I pressed on in the vain hope of convincing her. “That’s all it was! Yes, we crammed ourselves into a tiny bathtub together, and yes, got our

hands up on each other while we were naked—to say nothing of her biting me—but it was all just her trying to honeypot me. It's not like she has feelings for me. I swear!"

"Rena-chan, what?!"

Too late, I realized what'd I done. That gaping chasm feeling? That was the grave I'd just dug for myself.

"Aww, cut yourself a little slack," Youko-chan said, clapping a hand to my frozen shoulder. "If nothing else, I liked your *body*. You've got curves where it counts, and those boobs? Friggin' ginormous. You oughta give me another chance to see 'em."

"Sorry, but heck no!"

Ajisai-san's eyes just kept opening wider and wider. Oh hell, had I really messed up *again*?!

Long story short, Ajisai-san blew up at me after I explained everything and apologized like mad. It was only after another round of apologies that she let me off the hook, because, she said, we had bigger fish to fry right now. Later, once everything was resolved, we'd take a bath together. She made me promise. If I backed out, she'd be pissed. Like, *pissed* pissed.

But as she said, now wasn't the time. Now, Ajisai-san and I stood waiting in the grounds of the local shrine to ambush one Koto Satsuki-san.

"You think she'll show?" Ajisai-san asked me.

"Sure she will," I said. "She's Satsuki-san."

But I didn't feel as confident as I sounded. Ajisai-san was still riled up, and it was, to be honest, a little intimidating. It was only because we were about to confront Satsuki-san, I told myself. She totally wasn't still mad at me. And it was good to have an aggressive Ajisai-san in my corner, even if I felt a completely inexplicable stab of guilt about it.

"Satsuki-san and this shrine go way back," I told her.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. It's where she first became buds with Mai. So since we specified she should meet us here, she'll think we need her for something important. There's no way she'd no-show on us. You feel

me?"

"Yeah, that makes sense." Ajisai-san smiled, and it was adorable. "You sure know Satsuki-chan a lot better than I do."

"Hmm?"

Was it just me, or was there an ominous black cloud swirling around Ajisai-san for a moment there? Probably just me. Aji-homisaide-san was but a figment of my feeble brain's imagination; the real Ajisai-san would never channel her negative feelings toward other people. Never!

"Sure is chilly this time of year, huh?" I said, desperately trying to keep up a basic conversation.

"Sure is." She nodded amicably enough.

See? Nothing but my overactive imagination playing tricks on me. Just a brain fart! A mental oopsy-poopsy! My brain doing a cute widdle f*cky-wucky!

Now all we could do was pray Satsuki-san would arrive. Worse came to worst, we could always track her down later. I mean, we were in the same class, right? She couldn't avoid us forever, and she of all people had to know the sooner we cleared this mess up, the bett—

My thoughts were interrupted by a very familiar grumble of "What is it now?"

Every step Satsuki-san took up the stairs brought more of her into view: First, a long curtain of black hair that could've belonged to a witch. Then, a face that would turn heads no matter where she went. Finally, the limitless *don't-mess-with-me-if-you-know-what's-good-for-you* attitude. She was, in a word, terrifying. But I didn't have to face her alone!

"I'll have you know that I have a very busy schedule," she complained as she stalked up to us. "I can't always come running at your beck and—" She saw Ajisai-san and stopped dead. "Sena?"

"Thank you for coming, Satsuki-chan," Ajisai-san said.

Satsuki-san's eyes widened. Ajisai-san smiled at her, a smile bolstered by the resolve to see this through. Satsuki-san hadn't been expecting me to have company. She hadn't expected a showdown.

Though to be real with you, Satsuki-san radiated such a powerful

don't-touch-me aura that I wasn't sure if Ajisai-san was going to cut it. Like, even Ajisai-san couldn't get her to go, "Ooh, Sena, gosh. I'm so sorry. You're the one person I don't want to think badly of me, so I'd better fess up. The truth is, I'm trying to ."

But all the same, an unexpected Ajisai-san was hard to shrug off. The ball was in Satsuki-san's court, and I waited with bated breath to see how she'd react. Would she snarl at us in anger? Keep her cool and act like she didn't know anything? Or…?

She turned on her heel. "Goodbye," she said.

"Wait, what?" I said. Hello? "Hold on, Satsuki-san! We need to talk with you. It's really, really important to me!"

"But not to me," she said. "Sucks to be you. Goodbye now."

"Wait, Satsuki-chan!" Ajisai-san rushed forward to catch up. Of all the ways this scenario could've played out, this was one eventuality we hadn't planned for. "We already know everything. We know what you're up to!"

Satsuki-san didn't take the bait. She just sped up. Hey!

She was going to give us the slip if we didn't do something. "What's the big idea?" I shouted after her. "Come on, Satsuki-san!"

"Quit being so obnoxious," she snapped back.

"Look, I brought Ajisai-san with me and everything. You see her too, right? Right?! Come on. Maybe you treat everyone else like dirt, but you're always nice to Ajisai-san. I thought you didn't fight losing battles!"

"Enough."

"You can run, but you can't hide. We'll get you eventually! We know where you live. Quit while you're ah—"

She broke into a run. Dude!

"Damn it, Satsuki-san!" I yelled at her retreating figure.

Never, not in my wildest dreams, did I think she'd pull a runner on us. Ajisai-san was supposed to be her ultimate weakness! When she was min-maxed into magic, it only made sense to throw a magic-immune monster at her. Right?

"Stooop!" I yelled after her.

She did not, in fact, stop. Not like I expected her to, but it had been worth a try. All I could do was watch her dash out of the park, her bag clutched tightly to her chest.

“Stop!” I yelled once again.

There was no point in trying to chase her when she was running at a dead sprint. This was it. We’d lost her.

But just as I wrote it off as a lost cause, Ajisai-san grabbed my hand and yanked me forward.

“Ajisai-san?” I yelped.

“Come on, Rena-chan!” she tossed back over her shoulder. “We have to go after her!”

“But why?!”

Would we not see her literally the next day in class? Ajisai-san was supposed to be the voice of reason. This was not reason!

And then, like it explained everything, she shouted back with a hint of childish defiance, “’Cause she’s pissing me off, that’s why!”

“Ah. Okay, then.”

No arguing with that one. Who cared about reason? Reason would say we couldn’t catch Satsuki-san, and right now, we had a Satsuki-san to catch. To hell with reason!

Satsuki-san booked it, Ajisai-san and I behind her in hot pursuit. God, we looked like a couple of dorks. We were teenagers, for heaven’s sake. What we were doing playing the world’s weirdest game of tag?

“Satsuki-chan!” Ajisai-san yelled at the top of her lungs, not caring the way it made passersby stare. If only I didn’t care!

It’d been a hot minute since I’d seen the angel of Ashigaya floor the gas like this—the last time being the time she ran away from home over summer break. If there was anything I’d learned from that experience it was that, when push came to shove, she sure did rise to the occasion.

“Stop running!” she called. “Satsuki-chan, we only want to know how you really feel!”

Satsuki-san’s answering scream floated to us on the wind from far

up ahead. “I don’t feel *anything*!”

Total bull. Girls who didn’t feel anything didn’t run away from their friends like their lives depended on it.

“Just tell us what you’re thinking!”

“Nothing that concerns you!”

At least she was answering now, almost like it was a law of the universe: Satsuki-san couldn’t ignore Ajisai-san. See? I knew Ajisai-san had a 4× type advantage on her.

Still being dragged along by the hand, I yelled up at my dragger, “I think it’s working!”

“Me too!” Ajisai-san didn’t slow down for an instant. “Satsuki-chan! Do you have any idea how badly you’re pissing me off?”

We ran as fast as we could, that head of black hair our target. We didn’t dare slacken our speed for even a moment or two. We’d lose her.

“I hate you saying this is all for *my* sake!” Ajisai-san said.

Her sake? Oh, that was Satsuki-san’s response to the question of why engage herself to Mai. Because she’d do anything for Ajisai-san. Because she felt like she owed Ajisai-san. Because she felt the need to return the favor.

And Ajisai-san? Ajisai-san said to hell with that. “You and Mai lied to her family, and you say it’s for *my* sake? You think that’s supposed to make me happy? No! No, it doesn’t! Not one bit!”

We cut through an alley, dashed through a shopping arcade, darted through an intersection on green—

“So?” Satsuki-san shouted back, her voice dripping with distaste. “So what? So I misjudged you. That’s all it means!”

“No, it doesn’t! There has to be some other way. There’s *got* to be some way to make her mother come around.”

“Just because you say it doesn’t make it true! Anyone can say it. Even Amaori!”

“Satsuki-chan, you’re so full of it!”

Satsuki-san gasped.

Setting aside why she felt the need to bring me up…the *you’re so full of it* struck home at last. Satsuki-san may have been many things,

but she was, above all, completely weak to Ajisai-san. She was a good person at heart, and Ajisai-san was telling her she was up to *no good at all*.

Small wonder she snapped back, “Shut up, you…you moron!”

“Whoa!” I said. Satsuki-san, hurling insults at Ajisai-san? I was so shocked, my hand slipped out of Ajisai-san’s grip.

I almost expected her to cry. I practically expected her to blubber, “Satsuki-chaaaan! Why are you so mean to meee?” I was prepared to take her side, of course. We all knew Satsuki-san had a sharp tongue, but there were lines even she couldn’t cross.

But Ajisai-san didn’t cry at all. She did the exact opposite. She bit her lip, grimaced, and then yelled at the top of her lungs, “Satsuki-chan! That’s mean!”

Satsuki-san faltered for the briefest of moments, as if she’d stumbled over a rock.

“*Mean*?” she repeated. “Is that really the best you’ve got?”

“Well, it’s true!”

“You’re a fool, Sena! A nitwit! A stubborn, pigheaded, idiotic hypocrite! You say one thing and mean another, and I’ve always hated that about you!”

Oh my god. *Stop it, you two!* Every insult out of Satsuki-san’s mouth wounded me in the torso in the form of an anxiety stomachache. I hated this. I didn’t want to be a part of this! I didn’t want to see two of my friends tearing each other apart!

“That’s not true, and you know it!” I said. “Satsuki-san, you like Ajisai-san more than the rest of us. Don’t you?”

No one paid any attention to that, and it vanished into the thick of the catfight.

“Satsuki-chan!” Ajisai-san yelled. “Is this all because you have a crush on Mai?”

Satsuki-san gasped.

“Or, what, on Rena-chan?” she continued. “Is that what this is all about?”

“Wait, what?” I said. Satsuki-san, crushing on me? No way. Any other explanation, sure, but there was no universe in which that was

true.

Ajisai-san gulped for air. “Tell us, Satsuki-san! I just want to hear it in your own words.”

And then, at the worst possible moment, Ajisai-san tripped over her own feet and went down hard. She yelped in pain.

“Whoa!” I said.

Floor-the-gas Ajisai-san had crashed! *You okay, Ajisai-san?* The thick coat she was wearing saved her from the worst of it, so she wasn’t injured, at least. I went to help her up, moving on instinct.

“No, Rena-chan,” she said. “Go get Satsuki-chan!”

Oh snap. I looked up, and Satsuki-san had stopped too, momentarily distracted by Ajisai-san taking a spill. Our eyes met.

Satsuki-san was a bomb in human form. She was so packed with emotions she was ready to explode at any given moment, and she refused to let herself release any pressure in the form of words.

But Ajisai-san…! Aw, hell.

“Satsuki-san!” I yelled. And I ran.

She grunted in surprise when she saw me bearing down on her, and with a twist and a wild swing of her hair, she was off again.

I hated having to leave Ajisai-san there, but I knew I’d made the right choice. Ajisai-san was right. We *could* let Satsuki-san get away, but you know what? She was starting to piss me off too!

I wasn’t conscious of where she was leading me. I just ran, my eyes glued to her sprinting form the whole time. Eventually, I looked up and realized we were surrounded by fields. I knew this place. It was where I’d slumped to a halt in the middle of the road the night I bolted from Satsuki-san’s apartment.

I could barely wheeze for air, let alone catch my breath. I’d long since shed my coat and jacket, and now both were just deadweight in my arms. I wasn’t an endurance runner, that much was obvious. But it was Satsuki-san who crashed first, worn out by her yelled back-and-forth with Ajisai-san. She eventually staggered to a stop, her tired legs refusing to move another step.

Well, crap. If it came down to a battle of wills, I was bound to

lose. I summoned the last of my failing energy and sprinted the final couple of steps, grabbing Satsuki-san from behind the moment she was in reach. Well, "grab" was kind of an understatement. I may or may not have outright tackled her to the ground.

"Satsuki-san!" I said.

She hissed as we went down in a tangled heap. Ouch, oof. My body. It took me a moment to get enough air to pant out, "Finally. Got. You."

Jeez, it felt like I'd run enough for a lifetime. A good half of me cheered, relieved we could finally stop—but just then, I yelped. It was supposed to be me pinioning Satsuki-san, but that was sooo not the case. I didn't know how, and I didn't know when, but she'd gotten on top of me, and I was totally trapped.

She glared down at me, utterly silent. Crap, crap, crap.

"S-Satsuki-san?" I began. "Uh—"

"How dare…" she hissed.

"Eep!"

"How dare…you turn *Sena*…on me…"

The voice she used belonged to a creature behind a door that should've stayed closed forever. I stiffened. Her hair writhed even when there was no breeze to lift it. This was it. She was going to kill me. I had to say something. Now! Panic, and I was dead. (Never mind that I was already panicking.) This was it. My life was over.

I screamed, "What is it you even *want*, Satsuki-san?!"

"Good freaking question, Amaori!" she yelled back, battering me with her fury. "You think I know?"

What? *She* didn't know? She'd started all this—this BS—and she didn't know what it was for? Come the freak on! Satsuki-san was reckless, sure, but this was a level of recklessness unlike any she'd exhibited before.

"That's so irresponsible!" I said. "You agreed to marry Mai, and you don't even know *why*?"

"So? Why's it any of your business, if she's happy about it?!"

"You set Hanatori-san after me, didn't you? Didn't you?!"

“All I did was tell her the truth!”

God, the confessions just kept coming. “Truth, my ass!” I said. “I haven’t four-timed anyone, and you damn well know it.”

“So? Two girls or four girls at once—what’s the difference?”

“Oh, don’t try pulling that on me again!”

Rage contorting her features, Satsuki-san raised a fist. *Seriously?! No! No violence!* I thrust my hands forward to shield myself and squeezed my eyes shut. Desperation seized me, and I said, “What? Is it because you have a crush on me?”

Silence followed, not the jolt of pain I expected.

I cracked open one eye. Satsuki-san remained hunched over me, her face lowered and inscrutable to me. Behind her, rising to occupy the place the sun had long since vacated, was the brilliant and shining moon.

“I…” Every word left Satsuki-san’s mouth as a struggle. “I don’t do crushes.”

The same thing she’d told me time and time again. For my part, I struggled to imagine her ever harboring a crush. If she was to have feelings for anyone, it’d be Mai. Not me. I could see Satsuki-san liking Mai and trying to swoop in via the fiancée route, sure. Not…not whatever this debacle was.

“I don’t know if that’s true,” I said.

Because, when I looked up, my gaze met a face full of tears.

“If you don’t do crushes,” I said, “then why are you crying?”

It took her a moment, but in the end, she snarled, “Excuse me?” She quickly rubbed her face, scrubbing the evidence away. But I’d seen those tears. I *knew* Satsuki-san had cried.

The ground pressed cold and hard against my back. “It’s okay,” I said. My voice rose; I was shouting now. “It’s okay, I promise! You’re allowed to have crushes. There’s…there’s nothing weird about it. You’re—you’re you, yes, but that doesn’t change the fact that you’ve simply been a very pretty girl all along!”

Satsuki-san froze, at a loss for words. Me, I had all the words, and they needed to come out. “Look, if this is somehow all my fault, I’ll apologize. But if you have a crush on Mai, you don’t have to do all this.

Just tell her how you feel! We can—well, I don't know how it'll work with four of us dating, but we can figure it out. I'll do my best to find a way to make it work. Okay? But you need to once, just once in your life, say how you really feel—"

Satsuki-san reached forward, both hands outstretched, and caught me by the throat.

"Shut up," she said.

Huh? Slowly, gradually, she added pressure. Wait. Whoa, what? She wasn't actually choking me, was she? No way. Surely that was going too far! But no. She was. She was literally choking me to death! Oh my god. Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god!

"I don't *like* people," she snarled. "People don't *like* me. It's stupid. It's all stupid. You hear me, Amaori? I. Don't. Do. Crushes. Romance is the same thing as throwing your life away. You, Mai, Sena—you're all deluding yourselves. You're wrong. The whole world's wrong. You all have it backward, and I can prove it. Romance is *stupid*. All romance does is take, and take, and take! Romance can go die for all I care!"

I was horrified. I began to cry. "S-Satsuki-san…!" I whimpered. I trembled like a tiny animal in her grip, and that grip…slackened.

"Our engagement ceremony will be on Christmas," she said.

"Huh?"

"You have until then to stop me. After that, Mai is mine. In the end, she wasn't able to throw away what was most important to her. Forget her *feelings*. Her *crushes*. She made her choice, and she chose to protect what she *really* cared about. What she ought to protect."

There it was again, that same refrain. Making a choice wiped out all other options.

Just like that, as if she'd suddenly lost all interest in me, Satsuki-san rose to her feet. She left me on the ground, her knocked out opponent, with the moon at her back. "Squirm," she told me. "Writhe. I want to see you struggle, Amaori Renako. Fight with everything you've got if you don't want to lose this 'romance' of yours."

I stayed there, unmoving, long after she had left. Really and truly, I had thought I was going to die. This whole thing was… God. It had all been messed up from the start. Hadn't I picked up that something was wrong when Satsuki-san announced her engagement to Mai? And you

know what that something was? That Satsuki-san wasn't enjoying herself. Not once, not this whole time. Satsuki-san loved delighting in people's misfortunes—especially Mai's. Getting one up on Mai was a particular joy of hers. She'd grinned when she shoved the photo of us kissing in Mai's face. She'd crowed with joy when she got a kill on Mai in our FPS tournament. She was positively elated the time she'd beat Mai's score on our final exams. Time after time, she relished thumbing her nose at Mai with the same glee of a demon come to Earth to terrorize humanity. But now, now when she had the chance to make Mai owe her for life with this fake fiancée scheme—now she wasn't enjoying herself one bit. The old Satsuki-san would've been literally unsufferable. She would've been like, "Now, Mai, I expect prayers of gratitude from you on the nightly from now until the end of time. Chop-chop."

But this Satsuki-san didn't, and that was terribly, irreparably wrong. It was all my fault, I knew. My fault for feeling guilty.

I looked up, and the moon caught my eye.

As far back as I could remember, I'd always admired beauty. But beauty was never something I associated with myself. Beauty belonged in my classmates' Instagram photos or with the girls who shone bright as the sun—the Oduka Mais of the world. And, if I was going to be true to myself, the Koto Satsukis.

But that wasn't true, and I knew better than to say it was. Everyone had to strive for the light—the goodness, the beauty in the world. Everyone had to fight their own uphill battle to reach it, seeking to become better versions of themselves.

The question remained: What did Satsuki-san want? What was she hiding? Why did she snub romance with so much vehemence? I didn't have the answers, but I did have her next move. She'd told it to me. She was going to be formally engaged to Mai on Christmas. Once that moved forward, the throuple was dead in the water. Ajisai-san, Mai, and I could kiss being girlfriends goodbye.

That gave me a deadline. And I could work with that. I reached for the moon and clenched my fist tight.

If nothing else yet, I could say this: Satsuki-san meant every word she said. She wouldn't go back on her word once she'd given it, and that meant I had to match her stride for stride. I had to give this everything I had. Way, way more than I had in our first match. Lose this match, and

I'd lose my life—that's what it felt like to me, and that's what I was ready to fight for.

"…Game on, Satsuki-san," I told the moon. "I'll stop you. I swear."

She was challenging me—telling me *catch me if you can*. Lives depended on this. I'd need to use every tool in my arsenal and no doubt rely on Mai and Ajisai-san too. But, before all that, there was someone I needed to talk to.

"Wait for me," I said. "I'm going to tell you everything. I'm going to make you understand."

I'm sorry, Satsuki-san, I thought, casting that message to wherever she was. *You're my friend, and you've helped me a million times. I'm so grateful to have you in my life; you don't even know it. But I really, really, really like Ajisai-san, and I don't want to give up on Mai. This is my choice, Satsuki-san. This is my life.*

"You hear me, Oduka Renée?" I said. "I'm coming."

Once more unto the breach. Let the showdown commence.

The Koto Satsuki Kronicles: Redux

HER OLDEST MEMORY WAS of her mother crying. Her mother looked so small like this, shaking from the force of her sobs. Too small to ever forget.

"Mommy?" Satsuki-san—just a child, really—said. "Why are you crying?"

"Because," her mother said, "Daddy doesn't love me anymore."

Satsuki's mother raised her as a single parent. Oh, she was bright, she was bubbly; she brought up her daughter with love and joy. But she was romantic to a fault, and she was oh-so quick to fall into a stranger's arms, and for that, Satsuki could never forgive her. Satsuki did not even know her father's face. He wasn't in the family's official records at all, and it was hard to imagine the relationship between her parents hadn't had a countdown timer from the start. The end was always just around the corner, and now they'd turned that corner, and time was up.

Satsuki may have been just shy of nine or ten, but even she understood the situation for what it was. Who didn't? Well, her mother—and wasn't that the problem?

"Don't grow up to be like me," Satsuki's mother said, enfolding her daughter in her arms as she spoke. "Don't be a bad woman like your mommy. Study hard, go to a good university, get a good job. Find the right person. Have a happy marriage."

Satsuki didn't understand why she was being told all these things, but she could nod. So she did. "Okay, Mommy," she said.

And her mother's order—her wish—lodged deep, deep in Satsuki's heart.

Meanwhile, she watched her mother fall in love more times than she could count. A good many of these would-be partners were her mother's clients, but her mother could fall in love with anyone—someone introduced by an acquaintance, a man who spoke to her on the street. Love made her giddy. It was a buoyant force, something that

pulled smiles out of thin air. When her mother was in love, life at home was so pleasant that it even swept up Satsuki.

"This time will be different," her mother promised.

But repetition taught Satsuki otherwise. Say *this time will be different* often enough, and the phrase itself became a fantasy.

The problem was, Satsuki's mother had terrible luck with men. Just wretched, wretched luck. The relationship could've looked stellar at the outset, but sooner or later, it'd end in another breakup. Maybe the individual passengers in this revolving door of men were to blame, or maybe there was just something fundamentally lacking in Satsuki's mother—a kind of talent for love, maybe. Maybe it was both. All Satsuki cared about was that, with each failed relationship, her once-bright home grew a little darker. When unhappiness was the status quo, happiness was little more than a momentary break from the routine.

With each boyfriend, Satsuki found herself souring on her mother and her mother's way of throwing herself headlong into life. Why couldn't her mother get it? Why didn't she seem to realize that it'd never work, that romance would never fulfill her for long? Why did they have to constantly repeat this same song and dance? And why—oh, why—wasn't Satsuki ever enough for her?

She never stopped comforting her mother through the breakups, but in time, these questions began to fester inside her.

Why was a man her mother had only just met prioritized above her mother's own flesh and blood? Why would her mother even desire that in the first place? Why did something as fickle as romance have to rule people's lives, and why did it always have to hurt the loved ones who were already there?

She never found her answers, but she did grow up. Worse, she ran headfirst into a horrifying truth.

Satsuki was a frequent face at her mother's shop. They couldn't just leave her home alone after school; they didn't live in a safe neighborhood, and Satsuki was just a little girl. A beautiful little girl, at that. Her mother's parents babysat her some days, but there was bad blood between Satsuki's mother and grandparents. It just wasn't a feasible long-term solution.

That left her mother's shop, which, while perhaps not the most wholesome addition to a child's life, was the only option. Soon, Satsuki thought nothing of trotting in with her backpack and being cooed at by all the ladies. She'd spread her homework all over one of the tables, and the other girls at the shop would come by to help, always imparting on her one additional lesson: *Don't be like me when you grow up.* Just like her mother said. Satsuki nodded, dead serious, each and every time, and the ladies teased her for her earnestness. At the shop, there was a lot of chatter, a lot of noise, but also a lot of love.

Yet a realization crept up on Satsuki. The women her mother worked with were kind to her; their treatment was lovely as a rule, and Satsuki immediately warmed to every gentle touch. She didn't think her feelings could be romantic, of course. She hadn't the slightest idea.

But then that creeping realization came on, and it unsettled her: *I like people the minute they're nice to me*. It was perfectly natural on its own; all children looked up to the adults in their lives. But that needling concern never went away, and at last it morphed into a terrible, terrible question.

It happened over dinner. She was telling her mother the events of her day and she was excited and happy, and then everything went dark and she thought, *Am I no different than my mother?*

"Satsuki-chan?" her mother prompted, confused by the sudden silence.

Satsuki forced a smile. Her voice trembled. "It's nothing."

Her mother fawned over anyone and everyone; her mother treated life as a means to love the concept of love. Didn't that same blood flow in Satsuki's veins? Didn't Satsuki fall for anyone she was too close to as well?

The realization struck her to the core. And it frightened her. Romance could ruin her life too. Romance could convince her she cared more for some perfect stranger than the people she truly loved—romance could bring misery to the family.

Small wonder she found every excuse to avoid her mother's shop from that point on. She was scared, plain and simple. She was scared she'd turn into the same kind of simpering fool as her mother.

She made a promise to herself: If romance ruined lives, then she wanted no part in it.

She remembered her mother's heaving, sobbing back. To cry so hard it racked you—god, that was just pitiful, wasn't it? Turning your life over to someone else—wasn't that ridiculous? Making all your loved ones miserable—stupid and stupider.

If Satsuki never, ever got a crush on anyone, so much the better. She was perfectly happy with just her and her mother. To hell with crushes. Koto Satsuki didn't do crushes. If it meant never repeating her mother's mistakes, she was fine not having feelings for anyone.

She was still young when she thought this, and the vow was still too weak to be called a core conviction. But it strengthened, day after day.

Romance was stupid. All romance did was take, and take, and take. Romance could go to hell for all she cared.

And she was well on her way to dunking the pounding of her heartbeat deep, deep into a well and sealing the lid on tight when she met the girl newly transferred to her elementary school.

"Hello," the girl said. "It's a pleasure to meet you. My name is Oduka Mai."

Epilogue

AS NIGHT DREW IN ON SHIBUYA, condensation clung in a thin sheen to the windows of the high-rise that headquartered Queen Rose. The sophisticated reception room on the top floor belonged to Oduka Renée, and tonight, she had one other visitor.

"With that," Hanatori said, concluding her report, "I can confirm that all preparations for the ceremony are proceeding according to schedule."

"Good."

Renée sank deeper into her chair and sighed. Animated as she may have been in her skillful maneuvering of business matters, tonight, all that showed on her face was a dull, leaden emotion.

Hanatori's laptop was still projecting an image of a stately hall, its Japanese-style architecture boasting beautiful wooden corridors and scarlet-lacquered pillars. A perfect place for an engagement ceremony. A perfect date for Renée's only daughter to pledge her hand to another.

Hanatori had arranged for everything with exceptional speed: speaking to all the necessary parties behind closed doors, securing the venue, choosing everything from the flowers to the outfits to the post-ceremony banquet menu. It was meant to be an intimate ceremony with little media presence, but even for such a small ceremony, Hanatori had acted with unusual alacrity. Its purpose was clear: to forestall any interference.

"Quick work," Renée commented.

"Oh? If you say so, Renée-sama," said Hanatori.

"Quick work indeed for one so opposed to Mai and Satsuki's engagement."

Hanatori ducked her head, shamefaced. Renée was right. Hanatori wanted whatever made Mai happy, and for a time, she'd felt as if she'd truly lost her way. There was also the matter of the minor heart attack —but regardless, she wanted Mai to be happy. She truly did. It mattered little to her if the rest of the world thought Mai deserved better than her chosen partner, for Hanatori vowed to be the sole person to honor Mai's

wishes until the very end. Yes, she had yearned for a Mai × Satsu betrothal. But, just as Koto Satsuki herself had done when she was no more than a little girl, Hanatori wanted to do the right thing.

A pity, then, that this wish could not come true.

"I have been informed," Hanatori said at length, "that I was mistaken in my opposition." For the girl Mai and Satsuki had colluded to protect under Renée's very nose was not worthy of their efforts. "Am I correct in assuming you were aware the whole time? Is that why I was only now given the private investigator's report?"

Only just the other day, Renée had summoned Hanatori to inform her that Mai was being four-timed by the girl who was privy to her affections. After having sized up countless models over her career, Hanatori had considered herself an adequate judge of character—yet, she realized, she had failed to recognize what a terrible lapse of judgment this was.

It had felt as if the ground were collapsing out from under her feet. She put her head down and meekly obeyed her new duty from Renée: Destroy the scandal before the engagement ceremony.

She dropped Satsuki—here at Queen Rose on other business—off at her destination before confronting Mai's significant other with a stern warning: Stay away from Oduka Mai if she knew what was good for her.

"A dull lump of charcoal," Renée said, half to herself. "That was what I made of her at first glance—a worthless pebble on the side of the road. She could not shine bright enough to match Mai, and Mai shines very brightly indeed. Mai's light is felt the whole world over. How vexing that a tiny lump of rock caused a massive deal of trouble… But no matter. I can rest easy at last."

"Yes," Hanatori said, not without a moment's hesitation. "I would agree."

She ran over the timetable once more in her mind. Truth be told, she could not say with certainty that she was, in fact, doing the right thing. But she had lost the will to advocate otherwise. Besides, Renée had Mai's success at heart. Nothing was more important than setting Mai up for success.

Renée's smartphone buzzed atop the table, which puzzled Hanatori—unless she was misremembering, Renée was not wanted for

any meetings or appointments at this hour.

Renée frowned. She reached for the phone. “There’s a first time for everything.”

“Pardon?”

“Hello,” Renée said, answering the call and setting it on speaker mode. “Long time no speak.”

Renée may have been calm, but the moment Hanatori heard the voice on the other end of the line, she froze.

“Hi,” said *Amaori Renako*. “I’m speaking to Mai’s mother, right?”

The venomous pest! But Hanatori had crushed the little vermin for good. What…? How—

“I need to talk with you,” the pest went on, and there was strength in that voice. This was not the terrified, shaking girl from just days ago. Far from it. “About something very important.”

Hanatori knew, just *knew*—the gears were turning, and something huge had been set in motion.

Afterword

NICE TO MEET YOU. My name is Teren Mikami.

Welcome to the third installment of the "Yikes! Impending Deadline Boss Rush! In Honor of the Anime, Here's Three Books in as Many Months!" campaign. Last but not least is the next chapter of the main story—Volume 8! (Seven Seas Editor's note: Sensei is referring to the two short story collections that were released ahead of this volume in Japan. But fear not! We'll be releasing them in English ASAP!)

See? I kept my promises. I didn't make you wait another year, and I kept this bad boy under three hundred pages (in Japan). Look how thin it is! That's because I mistakenly wrote eighteen columns of text per page in Japanese. Most books are published with seventeen columns per page, which would put this volume over the dreaded three hundred marker. (I used this same trick in Volume 4; it would've been in the ballpark of four hundred thirty pages had it been published in the standard format.)

As I alluded to in the last book's—Volume 7's—afterword, this volume marks the start of a two-volume Satsuki arc—which, considering how little screen time Satsuki has, is not the most logical of arrangements. Welp. Let's just say it's like volumes 6 and 7. Put the two books together, and it'll average out to a Satsuki-focused story. Right? Right.

When I started writing this book, I planned on including as many funny scenes as I could in lieu of a huge emotional catharsis. That…may not have gone as planned. It occurs to me now that I should limit my afterword commentary in part-1 books to "Everything will be tied up nice and pretty in the next part. Just have faith in me!"

Therefore, everything will be tied up nice and pretty in the next part. Just have faith in me!

Great! Now that the readers trust me completely, I can relax and write the rest of this afterword.

1. THE TNFWIBYLU ANIME IS POPPING OFF!

Everyone's watched it by now, right? Granted, longtime readers who haven't seen it are likely not anime fans to begin with (which is fine; to each their own, and I'm so glad you read the books!) which suggests that shilling here is kind of a moot point. But hey, I'm just happy the anime is a huge success, so I'm going to talk about it.

Because the anime is really, really popping off! It's currently airing in Japan as I write this (and I'm also running a weekly #TNFWIBYLUAnimeAfterword promo on X).

I really didn't expect it to blow up to this degree. If you're reading the afterword of this book, it means you're a fan of the novel series itself, so I'm going to write from that perspective. Turns out, the slightly sexy scenes are generating a lot of the hype. I've been a yuri fan for so long that I thought *TNFWIBYLU* was kinda tame, if anything, so this surprised me.

None of this would've been possible if not for the anime team's amazing hard work. I really can't thank them enough.

My other series that GA Bunko publishes, *This Is a Story of a Girl Who Insists It's Ridiculous to Date Another Girl but Falls Head-Over-Heels in 100 Days*, can *not* be adapted into an anime. Nope, no freaking way. (No unless.)

2. RIP FOUR-KUN (SPOILER ZONE)

I made the executive decision to change Four-kun to Five-kun in the anime because what kind of chud has a PS4 these days? Lol. Lmao, even.

In volume 8, I made the change Renako's fault. You reap what you sow, Renako.

3. DON'T BELIEVE EVERYTHING I SAY ON TWITTER

I once said on Twitter (currently X) that Renako is so bad at cooking, about all she can do is use a rice cooker, which later ended up on her Wikipedia article. However, I thought it'd be funnier if that wasn't true, so that's been retconned. Please forget I ever said it. Canon is whatever's in the books themselves, got it?

4. A BRIEF EXPLANATION AS TO WHY THIS BOOK IS ANOTHER TWO-PARTER (SPOILER ZONE)

I laid the foundation for this current Satsuki arc in volumes 6 and 7 by increasing Lucie and Youko's screen time, which made the Haruna arc so long it had to be split into two books. Why, then, is this arc also split across another two books? Simple: I decided Chapter 3 was too crucial.

Season 2 of the story is focused on Renako's trials and tribulations of her journey down her own, atypical path. Therefore, I wanted to give the girls a moment to be glad they made this choice, to really savor this happiness they share. Otherwise, it would weaken their decision to stand firm to their beliefs and the real fear of losing one another. This required adding scenes I hadn't included in my original calculations. As for whether it pays off…well, you'll just have to see in the second half of this arc, now won't you? I don't plan on making you wait another year for it, though!

5. THE UPCOMING CONCLUSION TO SEASON 2 (SPOILER ZONE)

If you'll notice carefully, Season 1 doesn't have any Koto Satsuki Kronicle chapters. You see out of Mai, Kaho, and Ajisai's eyes, but it's not until Season 2 that you get a look into Satsuki's brain. That's by design. I wanted to drip-feed the reader information about Satsuki. I'm one of those authors who's really into those personal, idiosyncratic details.

This means… Well, it means what it means. Soon you'll have all the puzzle pieces necessary to understand who Satsuki is and how she thinks…or so we can hope.

Anyway, I'll do my best to deliver the finale of this Satsuki arc to you.

I'm also aware that Kaho-chan didn't get much screen time in this book, so I'm going to have to beg patience from the five bajillion Kaho fans across the globe—and Musshu-sensei—for just a little longer. To be frank, I don't think she'll have much screen time in the next book either. I'm sorry, Kaho-chan! I'll write you into a short story, I swear!

Now, I would've liked to proceed to the acknowledgments, but it seems I've run out of space.

Eku Takushima-sensei—thank you so much! My editors—thank you so much! Musshu-sensei—thank you so much! Everyone else who works on *TNFWIBYLU*—thank you so much!

Readers, thank you for having me! I'm off to go work hard!

Teren Mikami, signing off!

SPOILER WARNING!
TNFWIBYLU VOL. 8!
Thoughts and sketches
Nurse Rena-chin
ABSENT
I have work...
It's stupid.
I wanted to see them in costume!
THANKS.
YOU MAKE ME SMILE.
AWW!
NISHIYAMA, NO!!!
Poor monster.
SHE ALWAYS GOES FROM 0 TO 60 IN NO TIME.
DEATH
Satsuki Mai
Satsu Mai
FOR THREE SECONDS.
I STOPPED...
PIVO-KUN
HAVEN'T LOST.
BLUH...
BUT THEY...
She's so cute when she pouts!
In the arms of an angel...
RENAKO-SAMA?
SHE'S... ALL YOURS!
CIAO!
Thank you, seat belt!

SKREE!
THEY WON'T SELL BOMBS.
AWW!
AWW!
SHE'S INNOCENTLY CHARMING.
YOU CALLED ME CHARMING.
Cute, cute cute!
ZYOOM
She's so innocent!
SA-LAP
DAAAMN!
HER BANGS?!
CUT
HER FACE?!
ON DREW
DEATH
DEATH
DEATH
SURE DID!
DEATH PENALTY!
Koto Satsuki !!!
LET'S HAVE A GYOZA MAKING PARTY.
Oh boy!
Yippee!
THE END.
DASH
Next book NOW, Teren-san! Please!
She's so extra.

Creator Bios

AUTHOR BIO

Mikami Teren

BORN ON DECEMBER 16 IN SAITAMA

The *TNFWIBYLU* anime is airing as we speak. Are you guys liking it? I know I sure am!

My favorite TTRPGs are Double Cross and Tokyo Nightmare.

It's all going to be okay, because this is a Teren Mikami yuri book!

ILLUSTRATOR BIO

Takeshima Eku

BORN ON APRIL 23 IN OKAYAMA

I'm an illustrator and manga artist specializing in yuri.

Looking at *TNFWIBYLU* fan art, watching the *TNFWIBYLU* anime on loop, and drawing the *TNFWIBYLU* illustrations for the novel? Could life get any better?

A big thank you to Teren-san.

Thank you for reading!

Get the latest news about your favorite Seven Seas books and brand-new licenses delivered to your inbox every week:

Sign up for our newsletter!

Or visit us online:

gomanga.com/newsletter